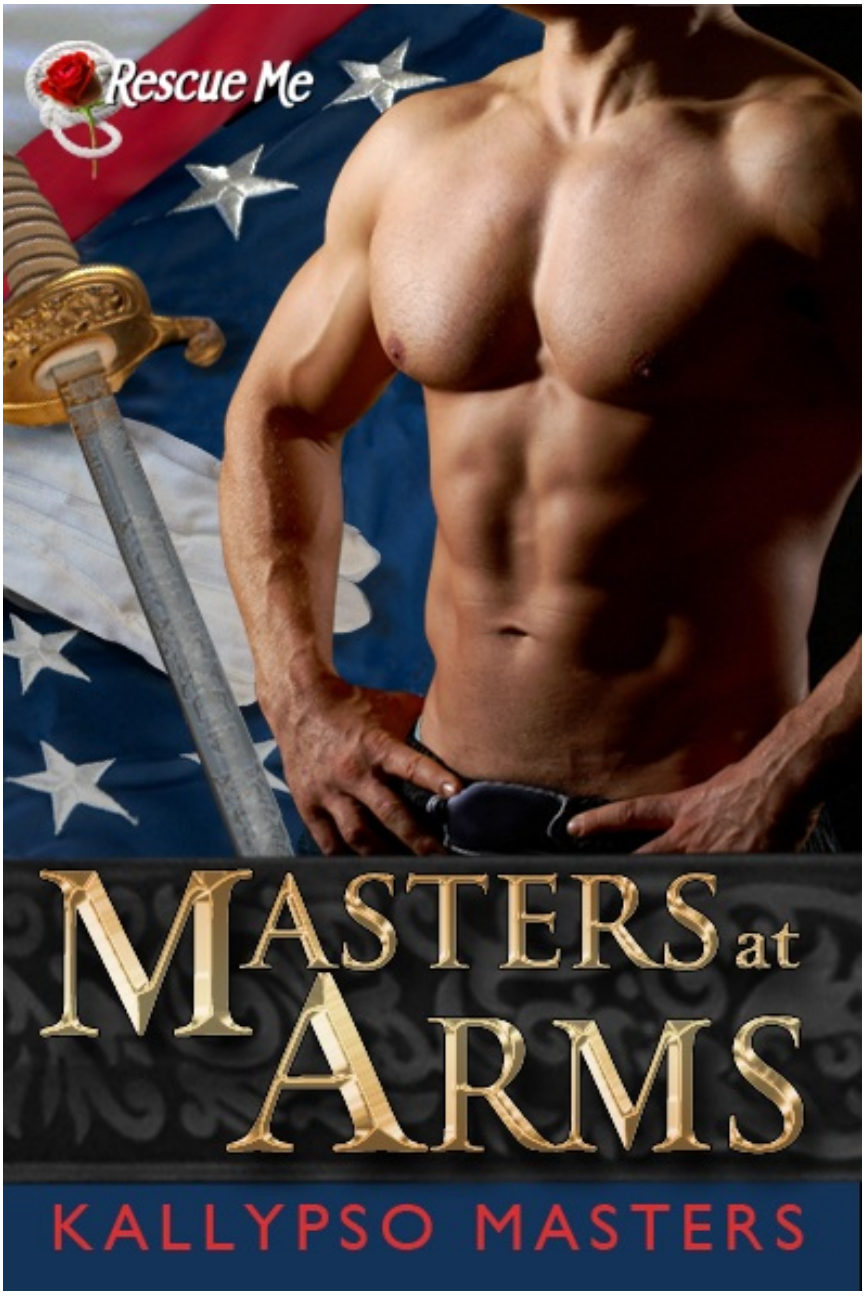
MASTERS at ARMS

KALLYPSO MASTERS


Rescue Me
MASTERS at ARMS
KALLYPSO MASTERS

Masters at Arms

by Kallypso Masters

Masters at Arms

First in the Rescue Me Series

by

Kallypso Masters

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my pre-publication fans who fell in love with the Masters at Arms—Adam, Marc, and Damián—and followed along on my journey since May 2011. Your encouragement and excitement kept me working to make sure this novel lived up to your expectations. (Of course, the masters used the flogger and single-tailed whip on occasion, as needed, for motivation, too.)

Now I turn the Master at Arms over to your good care. (But, trust me, if you're bad, they can be even more fun. Of course, you'll have to wait to see how their romances turn out in Nobody's Angel, Nobody's Hero, and Nobody's Perfect—where their sexy Dom modes will come to the fore.)

I also dedicate this book to the men and women in uniform. God bless and thank you for your service.

Acknowledgements

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To Laura Harner, Carol Ann MacKay, and S.A. Moore, thanks for your help in getting my military facts straight. All remaining errors are mine, of course. (Readers: Please keep in mind that the military protocols and equipment described in this book are from 2002-2005 and may not be the same as those followed currently.)

Thanks to my many Facebook friends for encouragement and support. Thanks to Elizabeth Leighton, who came up with the title of this book; to Lizzie Walker, who discovered Master Adam's craving for peanut butter; and to Anita Hayes who just knew Master Adam would listen to Aerosmith.

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Section One
Prequel to Adam's Story, *Nobody's Hero*

Night before Thanksgiving 2002, Chicago, Illinois

Joni, you were my anchor. I'm lost without you.

Adam Montague slumped into the seat at the terminal, hoping to catch a couple hours of sleep before his bus left. He looked around Chicago's busy terminal and saw the autumn decorations scattered every five yards or so. Apparently, going for the homey Thanksgiving look. *Not even close.* Just another crap-hole bus station, no different from the ones he'd seen a lot of during his early years in the Marines.

Twenty-two years. He'd survived the First Gulf War in 1991 and a deployment to Kosovo in '99. Just when he and Joni started planning for his retirement, some damned assholes attacked the United States, the country he'd sworn to protect and defend. So, he'd put off turning in his retirement papers until he could see how Operation Enduring Freedom went. He'd serve as long as he was useful and needed.

Adam had been deployed to Kandahar twice since 2001. His first tour ended with a medical leave earlier this year after a clusterfuck of bad intelligence led one of his recon units into an ambush with disastrous results. He'd gone in after them and gotten only a few of them out unscathed, but he'd lost two good men and managed to get himself injured in the bargain.

So, he'd been home at Camp Pendleton with Joni more than a month last winter as his body had healed. Now he wondered if she'd known about her cancer back then and kept it from him. Would it have made any difference if he'd known? He'd have been sent back to war and she'd still have had to fight the disease alone. She'd known the deal when she married him. While he was active duty, she'd have to take a back seat to whatever crisis he'd been sent to fight in the world.

His last tour had ended with his hardship leave two months ago when Joni's mother had finally told him Joni's cancer had come back with a vengeance. He hung his aching head and held it in his hands hoping the heels of his hands would quell the throbbing in his temples.

Memories of walking into that bedroom in Minneapolis two months ago flashed through his mind. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block it out, but knew the sight was imprinted there forever. God, the disease had so ravaged her body by the time he got home, he was afraid to touch her. Then her frail hand

had patted the queen-sized mattress and he'd crawled into bed with her and held her in his arms while she sobbed.

Adam raised his head and wiped his hands down his face. Numb. He still felt numb, whether from losing Joni or from the two-week bender, he wasn't sure. Probably a bit of both.

He guessed his units were out of Kandahar by now. Sounded like Iraq would be next on their dance card.

Bring it on. I got nothin' left to lose.

Fuck! Stinkin' thinkin' like that would get the men and women under him killed. He knew he wasn't mentally ready to go back, but his orders were to report Monday. He hoped he'd find the fire in his gut he'd need by the time he reunited with his units.

A cornucopia cutout hanging from a fluorescent light fluttered when a blustery wind blew in from the open doors. Joni had always taken so much pride in making their home festive for the holidays. She especially loved Christmas, even though it was just the two of them, well, when he wasn't deployed. She even kept her nativity set and some other favorite decorations displayed all year long for whenever he did make it home. Not that he paid much attention to that. He'd just been happy to see her, hold her, love her, and make up for lost time.

So damned much lost time.

What the hell was he going to do with all that stuff now? He'd call her mother and tell her to do whatever she wanted with it. He had his memories and a few photos—and her wedding ring. Shit, he hoped Joni had gotten rid of their playthings before she'd moved in with her mom. Well, nothing he could do about that now.

Camp Pendleton—or wherever he would be sent—would be his home until he retired from the Corps. He hoped that, by the time he got back in country, whichever war zone that would be, he'd have shaken off this black mood that matched the frigid black night outside.

In a way, he couldn't wait to get back. War and military life, he understood. What stumped him was cancer. Fucking cancer. Nothing in his tactical or weaponry training prepared him to help Joni fight against the insurgent that destroyed her body.

Not that she'd even wanted him to help her fight the disease. By the time she'd let her mom tell him about the recurrence, she was given a month at best. She'd managed to hold out for a couple weeks longer than that estimate.

God, his eyes burned. He rubbed them with a thumb and forefinger, then lowered his hand and clenched his fist. *Damn it, he should have known sooner*.

Joni told him she saw no point in pulling him away from a place where he could make a difference, just to sit by her bed and watch her die. She'd figured he'd have gone stir crazy with the helplessness of not being able to do anything to change the unalterable outcome.

God, he'd kill for another bottle of scotch right now. He looked at the wino passed out on the floor across the room. Adam thought about offering the man a wad of money for whatever he had left in the brown-paper wrapped bottle he clutched to his chest with both arms, like a lover.

Adam had held Joni in his arms for the last time, just like that, as she had slipped away from him forever. Before she died, two days short of their twentieth wedding anniversary, she'd assured him she wouldn't have changed a thing in their years together.

Hell, he'd sure have changed a few things.

Togetherness wasn't the best word to describe their marriage. She'd lived with him on base when he wasn't deployed, and they had eight years together after the end of the Gulf War and before he'd been sent to Kosovo. Then came Operation Enduring Freedom and he hadn't been home much since.

They'd talked about the good times they'd had in the '80s and '90s when he hadn't been deployed to war zones. Their Dom/sub power exchanges had been total then. But that had been impossible to sustain while deployed.

Fire burned the backs of his eyes. Joni never wanted him to take his focus off the military missions to deal with her "little problems." Like the time she'd totaled the car. She'd had to take care of everything herself. He'd been deployed, of course. As always, she'd handled everything perfectly. Except she hadn't told him. Said she was afraid he'd be upset about the car. Hell, he didn't give a shit about the fucking car. He'd just been worried when he heard how close she'd come to being killed.

All of the times she'd needed him—from when she'd held their stillborn son in her arms in 1991 to when she'd fought her last rounds of chemo and radiation this past summer—he'd been fighting battles elsewhere. Long deployments in too many hot spots in the world had come before her more often than he'd wanted. Hell, he'd barely made it home in time to watch her die.

Joni, I'm so fucking lost without you.

He blinked against the burning in his eyes. After her burial, Adam spent two weeks locked in a Minneapolis motel room trying to dig a hole deep enough to bury his sorrows. He'd only wound up in a drunken stupor, not unlike that wino's over in the corner. Joni had told him to lay off the bottle twenty years ago because his excessive drinking scared her. Her father had been an alcoholic. He'd wanted her to be proud of him and had quit for her.

Until now. In the past couple weeks, there'd been a few nights where he'd come out of his stupor clutching a bottle of scotch to his chest.

A lousy substitute for Joni.

But, if he hadn't been due back at Camp Pendleton in five days, he'd still be in that hell-hole motel—or buried six feet under beside Joni. He remembered how close he'd come one night, staring down the barrel of his pistol.

He shuddered and looked around the still-crowded station. He'd been here for several hours waiting for his next connection. With holiday travel in full swing, Adam had known he wouldn't have managed to hop a seat on a flight in time to get to Pendleton by Monday. Maybe if he'd sobered up sooner. No matter. This weekend, the clientele in bus stations better suited his foul mood. They wouldn't bother him and he fucking sure wouldn't bother them. The last thing he wanted right now was a chatty companion asking if he was headed home to be with family.

He had no family anymore.

Adam leaned forward and held his aching head in his hands. He sure as hell hoped he'd lose the aftereffects of this binge before he got back on base. The colonel would bust his chops if he saw him like this. Adam knew he had a lot of eager young men and women looking to him to set an example, too.

He just didn't give a shit about anything or anyone right now, and didn't know when he would again.

"Can I get you something to eat?"

Adam looked up, squinting at the throbbing in his temples caused by the fluorescent lighting. *Yeah, blame the lights*. He saw a lanky black man in pimped-out orange pants and a Robin's egg-blue shirt talking to a teenage girl seated across from him. She must have just sat down a few minutes ago, because he'd have noticed her before with her spiked neon pink hair and the most god-awful amount of makeup around her eyes.

Despite the bravado of her flashy hairstyle and all-black Goth outfit, her wide-eyed gaze darted to the pimp, then away. When he slid into the empty seat next to her, she leaned away from him in small degrees, as if not wanting to offend him by just getting up and moving. When the dickwad reached out to touch her hair, she squeezed her blue eyes shut and shrank into the chair.

Little girl lost.

Don't let him scare you.

Adam's attention shifted to the dickwad. No, Dickwad—with a capital D.

"No, thanks. I already ate," she answered in a high-pitched squeak.

Don't be polite. Tell him to go fuck himself, hon.

“How about a drink? There’s a liquor store around the corner.” He took her elbow, and she shook him off.

“No!”

Better.

“Thanks, anyway, but I’m waiting for my bus to New York.”

Aw, honey, don’t go and tell him your plans.

“That where you live?”

“No. I, um, have a job waiting.” She looked away.

Shit. A runaway. The girl barely looked fifteen under all that makeup. Adam sat up straighter, ignoring the pounding in his head. If that sorry bastard touched her again, he’d ice him like a salmon.

Don’t forget, you have your own bus to catch. He didn’t need to be playing hero and winding up doing jail time for assaulting the jerk.

The runaway pulled her backpack closer to her chest and tried to scoot to the other side of her chair, but the armrest prevented her escape. Like a shark, the pimp moved in on her—the most vulnerable prey he could find here on the night before Thanksgiving.

Her hand shaking, she unzipped a pouch in the pack and pulled out a book. The cover showed a vampire whose fangs were about to pierce the neck of some half-dressed busty woman who looked like she was about to come. While the runaway pretended to read, she cast nervous glances at Dickwad. He just continued to stare at her, trying to intimidate her. Succeeding, too. When the pimp reached out to stroke her hair again, she pulled away.

“Please, leave me alone.”

Aw, fuck, don’t let him see you cry. The tears welling in her eyes tore Adam’s guts out. He’d never been able to see a woman cry. Girls either, for that matter.

The pimp hooked his hand around her arm just above the elbow and tried to force her to her feet. “Come on, baby. Let’s get outta here.”

Anger boiled over in Adam, a sensation he’d been trying to medicate against for weeks. Clenching his fists, he took a deep, slow breath. He fought the need to pummel Dickwad into the ground. Hell, as hung-over as he was, Adam wondered if he’d even be able to take the prick down.

But he’d love the chance to work off some of his anger. Damned if he’d sit and watch that shithead harass a little girl—or worse. Adam stood and took a step toward them, towering over the man.

“I think the young lady asked you to f—” remembering the young girl, he reminded himself to watch his language, “—get lost.”

The pimp looked him up and down. “Fuck off, soldier boy. Get your own ho.”

Adam's hands snaked out to lift the skinny little prick out of the seat like a sack of potato chips. Obviously Dickwad had no such filter on his salty language. He threw him across the room and watched with satisfaction as the perv slid until he landed against the ticket counter, far from the girl. Adam stood with legs apart, braced for Dickwad to make a move against him.

Come on, punk. He'd love the chance to pummel the prick within an inch of his sorry-assed life. Adam clenched and unclenched his fists his breathing fast and shallow.

Waiting.

When the pimp stood up, he brushed himself off, and slunk toward the exit muttering something about evening up the odds. Adam turned to look down at the girl. *Damn.* Her hands were shaking so badly, he thought she'd pull her book apart at the seams.

Scared to death.

*

Don't puke, Karla. Just don't puke.

Karla Paxton's stomach got all weird and fluttery. Her hands began to shake. Then the soldier turned around and looked down at her. The shaking grew worse. What was the matter with her?

At first, she'd been afraid they were going to fight it out right in front of her, but the creep just got up and walked away. Well, she couldn't blame him. The tall soldier had huge muscles—and obviously knew how to use them.

The soldier had sprung at that skaggy jerk like a mountain lion on a mouse. She'd never seen anyone move so fast. *Especially someone his age.* He had gray hairs at his temples, although the rest of his hair was dark brown—clipped very short, but not as short as Ian's was now. His eyes were bloodshot and kinda sad looking. He must not have had much sleep lately.

Her gaze took in his wrinkled khaki shirt. If Ian's uniform had been wrinkled like that, he'd have gotten in trouble. She looked at his ring finger. Married. His wife must not be nearby to take care of him. Of course, her mom would have made Ian—and probably her dad—iron his own shirt.

When he sat down where the jerk had been a few minutes ago, she shook even more, despite the fact he didn't get into her personal space like that skag had done. Then the heat coming from his body made her feel warm and her hands stopped shaking after a little while.

"You okay, hon?"

Oh, my God. Did he just call me hon?

Not trusting her voice and not too sure about how safe *he* was, she just nodded. He reminded her of Dr. McNeil on *Chicago Hope*. She and her Mom

had watched the series all the time until the show got canceled. Karla thought Mark Harmon looked hot, but didn't tell Mom that. Mom was always pushing her to notice the dweebs in her class. But they were so immature.

"Where you headed?"

He pulled her back from her thoughts. "New York City."

"Family there?"

Karla looked away. What's with all the questions? "No. I need to get away from family right now."

"Someone expecting you in New York?"

She closed her eyes and nodded. "Sure." *No.*

"When does your bus leave?"

"Six forty-five."

He looked at his watch. "That's another seven hours." He sighed as if that was a problem. What was it to him? She didn't need a babysitter.

Then she glanced around at the men nearby and asked him, "What time does yours leave?"

"Four-thirty."

Damn. Why did that make her feel scared again? Well, he wasn't going to talk her out of going. She could take care of herself.

Yeah, like you did with that pimp.

Suddenly, Karla wasn't so sure she wanted to talk with the soldier anymore. No one was going to talk her out of making this trip. She'd saved money all year, working at a bakery near her home all last summer and babysitting until she had enough for a bus ticket and almost fifteen hundred dollars to spare. When she got to New York, she'd get a job at one of the clubs. Someday, she was going to be a star, recording her own CDs and everything.

But she wouldn't tell him that. He'd just nod and say something condescending like "that's nice," and not believe she could do it at all. She was tired of dreaming. It was time to make her dreams come true.

Her stomach growled. She pulled the book and backpack closer to try and shield his ears from the embarrassing sound.

"Have you had anything to eat lately?"

"Sure." Her stomach called her a liar, even more loudly.

He chuckled and his green eyes lit up for the first time. The corners of his eyes crinkled into tiny lines. Then she felt those funny butterflies in her stomach again.

She must really be hungry.

"How long ago?"

She tilted her chin up. "I had pancakes for breakfast."

“Come on,” he said, laughing. “Let me buy you some dinner.” He stood next to her, as tall as the Sears Tower, but didn’t grab at her like the creepy man had. He just waited, as if she had no choice but to stand because he had ordered her to go with him. Well, no way was she going anywhere with a stranger. He was too big. She wouldn’t be able to fight him off.

Even if I did want to.

Whoa! What was the matter with her? He looked as old as her uncle, who was forty-three.

“No, thanks. I’m not hungry.” She opened her book again, hoping he’d take the hint and go away.

When he did just that, she didn’t understand why her heart squeezed tight. She looked up and watched him leave, rounding the ticket counter and heading for the exit. *Gosh, he didn’t even say goodbye.* And where was his coat? Didn’t he know it was freezing cold out there?

Looking around, she noticed a lot of scary people watching her—mostly men. She guessed women were too smart to catch a bus in the middle of the night. None of these guys had eyes that crinkled when they laughed. They didn’t smile like they cared about her. They just leered, especially when they stared at her boobs, making her skin crawl as if a bunch of ants had taken over.

She looked across at where the soldier had been sitting and saw a large duffel bag that must belong to him. One of the boob-leering men started to reach down slowly as if to hide the fact he was about to take the bag.

“Leave it alone!” Karla wasn’t sure where that voice came from, then realized it was hers. The man stopped dead. Wow! “He’s coming back soon and, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave his things where he left them.”

When the man stood up and walked across the terminal, Karla began to shake again. Only this time, there were no butterflies. Just a feeling like the flu she had last year.

Would she have to deal with creeps like these all the way to New York? Had she made the right decision to run away? Her parents didn’t understand how urgent it was for her to start her career now, rather than wait a few years. They just thought she was a stupid sixteen-year-old.

Wait until you graduate from high school. Then you can study music at Loyola.

They’d been telling her that since school started. Didn’t they realize she couldn’t wait that long? Now was her chance. Her music teacher said she had a gift. She didn’t need more schooling. She just needed to find a job where she could sing for people who could discover her talent and offer her a recording

contract. If she didn't go now, she just knew she'd never get there. She'd never be anybody in the music business.

Her parents would be surprised, and sad, when they woke up tomorrow and she wasn't in her bed. Her eyes burned. She loved them a lot and didn't want to make them sad, but…

"Here. Eat this."

Karla looked up to find the soldier had returned, holding a fast-food bag toward her. She grinned as she stashed her book in her backpack and took the sack from him. *He came back to you*.

As soon as she opened the sack, the smell of greasy burgers and fries caused her stomach to rumble even louder than before. She felt her face grow hotter, but was too hungry to let it faze her. She'd skipped lunch today so she could run to the bank and clean out her account for the trip.

"Thanks." She smiled up at him.

The soldier sat down beside her again. She felt him watching her. When she glanced his way, he just smiled and watched as she pigged out on the food. Gawd, she hadn't realized how hungry she was! Feeling a little guilty, she held out the box of fries and offered him some.

He chuckled. "No. They're all for you."

After she'd finished the second hamburger, he handed her a soda. She drank half of it before letting go of the straw and taking a deep breath. She felt so full now she thought she'd explode.

"That was so good. Thanks." She smiled at him. He really was just trying to be nice. Still, she knew to be leery of strangers, even nice ones. But she also knew she'd have to learn to trust some strangers, if she was going to make it in New York. He seemed like a safe one.

Maybe because her brother was in the Army. Ian would have helped out a scared girl, too, if someone was bothering her.

"So, where's home?"

"Here," she answered, without thinking. "But I'm going to live in New York."

"Why New York?"

"They have the best Goth clubs and recording companies."

"So you like to sing?"

"Better than anything."

"What do you sing?"

"Tarja's music mostly." She could tell by his blank stare he had no idea who Tarja Tarunun was. Well, her parents had no clue either. "She's the lead singer for Nightwish." Still blank. "A metal band from Finland."

He nodded. “I see.”

No, you don’t. But he was kinda cute for pretending he did. She started to crumple up the bag, and then his hand covered hers to stop her. She felt a weird tingling go up her arm, almost like being shocked with electricity. Her heart banged against her chest.

“Look inside. There’s more.”

She reopened the bag and moved the crumpled wrappers and empty fries box aside. Like opening a Christmas present. She had a momentary pang of regret, realizing she wouldn’t be home to open presents this year.

O-M-G, pie! The box was rust colored. “Apple or cherry?” she asked.

“Cherry.”

“How’d you know? That’s my favorite!” She reached in and pulled out the box.

He shrugged and smiled. His eyes lit up again. “Lucky guess.”

*

Adam watched her devour the pie in just a few bites. He thought teenage boys had voracious appetites. How she stayed so skinny was beyond him. Of course, she hadn’t eaten all day. Maybe he should have bought her more to eat.

Man, her parents must be worried sick.

He regretted that he and Joni hadn’t been able to have children. She’d have been a terrific mom. Tamping down those thoughts, he looked at the little Goth girl. She wore too much black. At least her pink hair gave her some color.

“Isn’t your family going to miss you for Thanksgiving?” *Aw, hell*. He’d gone and asked one of those fucking nosy questions he didn’t want people asking him.

Watch your language around the kid.

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth. “They’ll understand.”

Doubtful.

After she’d finished the pie, she put her garbage into the bag, except for the soda, and started to get up to throw it away. Adam took the sack and wadded it even tighter, then lobbed it into the open can at the end of the row. Score! First basket he’d made since he’d played in high school.

He reached out his hand to her, “We haven’t been introduced. I’m Master Sergeant Adam Montague, U.S. Marine Corps. But you can call me Adam.”

She placed her limp hand inside his and they shook. “Karla Paxton…the next Madonna.” She giggled. “My friends call me…um, well, Karla’s good.”

He smiled. So naïve. Innocent. He wondered what her friends called her, but wouldn’t pry. God, the kid wore her heart on her sleeve. She wasn’t going to last long in New York. He worried about her going there and wished he could wake

her up with a dose of reality. He'd seen his share of hell in this world and didn't want her to have to experience it.

"I'm sure you've already lined up a place to stay in New York. Right?"

She dodged his gaze. "Well, I figured I'd check in at the YMCA or a youth hostel or something until I find an apartment."

"Where do you plan to live after that?"

"Soho." Her eyes lit up.

Shit. A dreamer. She'd probably seen the trendy neighborhood in a movie or music video. "There are lots of clubs in Soho I could get a job at."

"I see you've done some homework." *Not nearly enough, though*. "So, what's an apartment in Soho going for these days?" He had no clue, but figured most places in Manhattan would be way out of range for a teenage runaway.

"Well…" she began, and then looked away, her brow furrowing. "It's pretty expensive from what I saw on the Web. I'll probably have to find a roommate or two and share expenses."

His gut twisted at the vision of her falling into the clutches of another predator at the Port Authority terminal. Yeah, they'd give her a place to stay all right. *Fuck.* She needed to go back home and spend Thanksgiving with a family that loved her. She didn't seem to be running away from something so much as running *to* something. She just didn't have the patience to wait around to do a little more growing up.

Of course, he'd run away at sixteen himself. He'd had to go through a lot of hell and trouble before he'd found first the Marines and then Joni, both of whom had straightened his ass out.

At least Karla still has family to be with for the holidays.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Just one brother. Ian. He's in the Army National Guard. That's why…" she looked down at her backpack and played with the zipper latch.

"Why what?"

She shook her head and smiled, her face flushing.

"C'mon. Tell me." He grinned. So fucking hard to believe there was such innocence left in the world. Certainly not in his world. Not anymore.

"Well," she looked him in the eye, her blue eyes sparkling. She smiled. "That's why I sat across from you. Your uniform reminded me of Ian's."

Khaki looked about the same for either branch. Thank God. Adam didn't want to think what might have happened if she'd sat somewhere else in the station tonight. If he hadn't become aware of her predicament in his post-hangover haze.

She sighed. “I miss him.” Adam watched as a single tear trickled down her cheek, leaving a trail of watery mascara.

“Where is he?” *God, don’t let him be another fallen hero.* They’d lost too many troops in this damned war. He tried to remember if she’d said “is” or “was” in the Army.

“He finished boot camp two months ago. He can’t tell us where he is yet.”

Adam didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath until he let it out in a whoosh. “He’s well-trained, I’m sure. Don’t worry about him. He’ll do fine.” *Like Adam could be sure of anything these days.* But military families had enough to worry about without knowing what was really going on.

“I hope so. Are you a hero, Adam?” She smiled at him just the way Joni had done when he sat at her booth in that restaurant in St. Paul. Her short black waitress skirt had shown off the sexiest legs he’d ever seen. She’d confessed later that his uniform had attracted her, as well. She’d called him her very own hero warrior.

Damn it. I don’t need hero-worship responsibility right now.

“I’m nobody’s hero, hon.” Not even Joni’s. He hadn’t been able to fight the only battle she’d needed him to win for her. Aw, hell, don’t go there again.

“Aren’t your parents going to be upset when they find out you’re gone, too?” He hadn’t meant to be so blunt and felt a pang of guilt when the light went out of her eyes. But at least he’d wiped the hero worship from her gaze.

“They don’t understand.”

“I’ll bet they understand more than you know.”

“No, they…”

She gasped as she looked beyond his shoulder. He looked in the direction of her distressed gaze and saw the pimp had returned with a couple of his thugs.

Adam smiled. *Bring it on, boys. I’ve got nothing left to lose.*

Then he remembered Karla and knew he couldn’t let them anywhere near her tonight. He turned back toward her.

“Karla, look at me. Now.” When she finally dragged her gaze away from the pimp and his scumbag buddies, Adam said, “Go to the ladies room and stay there until you hear me give you the all-clear. If there’s a lock on the outside door, use it. If not, lock yourself in one of the stalls.” Her blue eyes grew as wide as saucers. She swallowed hard, but sat frozen. Using his master sergeant’s voice, he growled. “Now!” She jumped, and then her blank stare focused on his face a second before her hands clutched her backpack. She ran toward the head.

“Good girl,” he said, though he knew she didn’t hear him.

With Karla out of harm’s way, he could devote his full attention to the bilge rats slowly approaching him. He stood and set his legs, preparing for battle. The

one on the far left held a switchblade. The one on the right wore brass knuckles. The pimp just wore a cocky smirk.

You may think you have the upper hand, punk. But I'm going to show you different.

"What's the matter, soldier boy? Haven't been able to get into her pants yet? Mebbe I need to show you some moves."

Okay, perv. Now I'm pissed.

"Yeah, I'd like to see that."

Adam knew his commanding officer would be pissed, too, if one of his master sergeants was tossed in jail, so he waited for one of the punks to make the first move. The few people waiting for buses scattered to the other end of the terminal, out of danger. Except for the passed-out wino, but he wasn't in the way.

Adam didn't have long to wait. The man carrying the knife lunged with his body his weapon pointed toward Adam's gut. Adam answered with a spinning hook kick to the side of the man's head. The knife flew from his hand as he fell to a heap on the floor.

That should even the odds a little bit.

Movement. Out of his peripheral vision, Adam saw the dickhead with the brass knuckles move, expanding the area Adam needed to defend. The first punch headed straight for Adam's kidney. He swung away to evade contact. His two-week bender must have slowed down his reaction time. But at least the impact of the blow landed on Adam's shoulder blade and not his kidney. The dickhead followed with a bare-knuckled blow to his mouth. Adam groaned at the impact. Focus, man.

Adam stepped back. He needed room. Swing. Now! His roundhouse kick landed squarely against Brass Knuckle's ear. The man reeled sideways until he hit the bank of chairs. He sat down abruptly, the expression on his face one of stunned disbelief. Dazed. The man's eyes glazed over as he curled onto his side.

Breathing hard, Adam turned toward the pimp. *Now, prick, it's just you and me.*

Once again, Adam waited for the man to make the first move. Without his bodyguards, he appeared to have lost his bravado just when it would have become a fair fight. The pimp backed away from Adam, toward the ticket counter. Adam stalked him like a puma.

With his peripheral vision, Adam watched two of Chicago's finest enter the building with weapons drawn.

"Hands in the air!"

Adam complied, but apparently they knew their usual suspect and one of the officers had the pimp face down on the floor, hands cuffed behind his back, within fifteen seconds. Adam spoke with the second officer briefly to let him know what had happened. He was grateful they only asked for his name and cell phone number. They could follow up with him later if they needed more information.

But Adam needed to make sure Karla was all right.

*

Karla huddled in the bathroom stall. She'd locked the stall door in hopes of protecting herself if those guys had come after her. *Yeah, some protection*. The so-called lock barely kept the door closed for privacy, much less safety.

She couldn't stop shaking. Her stomach clenched and heaved. At least there was a toilet nearby if she got sick. But it was awfully dirty in here.

The sounds of the fight outside brought tears to her eyes. Adam had only wanted to protect her and now he could be killed. All because she was stupid and selfish.

I just wanna go home. Please, God, protect him and help me get back home.

"Hands in the air!" Then silence. No more grunts, crashes, or groans. Her heart pounded against her chest. She closed her eyes. The rush of blood pounding in her ears blocked out any other sound. Tears streamed down her face.

Please let him be all right. Oh, God, let Adam be all right.

The sound of the bathroom door creaking open caused her to back up against the tile wall. She held her breath, hoping they would think she'd left. *Stupid. They know you're in here, Kitty. They can see your feet.*

"Karla? Hon, you okay?"

The wind gushed out of her lungs. She'd held her breath so long, she gasped for air several times. *Oh my God. Adam!*

"It's over. You can come out now."

She dropped the backpack, fiddled with the wobbly latch, and opened the stall door. "You're alive!"

"You know, I think I am." He sounded surprised.

Relief was short-lived. *Oh, no!* His beautiful face! "You're bleeding!" Blood trickled from his lip down to his chin.

"I'm fine. How are you doing?"

Me? How can he think about me at a time like this?

Maybe he was out of his mind from where they'd hit him in the head. Remembering freshman health class and all the times she'd watched Mom patch up Ian, Karla rushed to the sink and pulled out a wad of paper towels, wetting

them with cold water. She blinked away the tears. She'd caused him this pain. If she hadn't run away…

When she turned, she realized she'd never be able to reach his face.

"Kneel down. I need to clean you up."

He waved her hand away, dismissing her. "I said, I'm fine." His tone hurt her feelings. She was only trying to help. After all, his injuries were all her fault.

She remembered the tone of voice her Mom used to get Ian to obey her when he'd been stubborn, even when he had grown much taller than Mom. Karla pulled herself to her full five-foot-six-inch height and straightened her shoulders. "I. Said. Kneel. Down."

That got his attention. He grinned at her in a funny way. Then he knelt.

Oh. My. God. It worked! He obeyed her!

*

Adam's mind flashed back to the one and only time Joni thought she'd play the dominant with him. She was so damned cute in her over-the-knee stiletto boots, wielding a riding crop and wearing a black bustier that pushed her beautiful breasts up to the point of nearly spilling out. Well, he'd let her keep wearing the bustier and boots for a while, but wound up using the crop on *her*.

Ah, Joni. I miss you, my precious subbie. How can I go on—?

"What happened to those guys?"

Adam blinked and saw the pink-haired runaway glancing toward the door with worry, as she pressed the cold paper towels against his lip. He drew a deep breath, beginning to feel the pain radiating through his shoulder. "The police have them all in custody. They won't be bothering anyone for a while."

"Where else did they hurt you?"

"One landed a lucky punch to my shoulder." Pulling the paper away from his lip, he saw it covered with his blood. He could have let those thugs put an end to his misery tonight. Instead, he'd learned he still had the will to fight for what was right. Karla had needed him. He'd answered the call.

She threw the bloody paper in the trash.

"I'm fine." Rising to his feet, he felt aches in places he didn't know he had. *Definitely getting too old for this shit.* He wet a towel and handed it to her. "You might want to wipe the mascara off your cheeks. I don't want your parents thinking the worst about what adventures you've had tonight."

"How did you know I wanted to go home?"

Good girl.

"Lucky guess."

Apparently, she'd had enough of the exciting runaway life. If she hadn't come to her senses, though, he'd already planned to take her home anyway,

kicking and screaming if he had to.

After she'd cleaned her face, he picked up her backpack and slung it over his shoulder with a grunt. *Shit. Was there any place on his body that didn't hurt?* He'd have a bruise on his shoulder blade tomorrow, too. Even his legs and foot ached from his impact punches.

Bring it on. He focused on this new pain. Funny, but the physical pain helped the emotional pain to recede a bit, even if it was only a temporary reprieve.

Adam walked up to the ticket counter and waited as Karla got a refund for the ticket she wouldn't be needing—not for a few years at least. The dispatcher announced his bus departure in five minutes. Oh, well. He'd just have to catch the next one tomorrow. He asked when that would be.

"Nine-fifteen."

"Good. Just a few hours behind schedule."

"No, sir. P.M."

Fuck. He hoped he could make it back to Pendleton on time.

But no fucking way was he letting Karla wander the streets alone tonight to get back home. With that wild pink hair, she was nothing but a trouble magnet.

*

Karla didn't know what to say to him, so they rode in silence most of the cab ride home. He had to spend another day in the bus station waiting for his bus, all because of her. Was he mad at her? He just stared out the window, looking at the lights of downtown as the cab made its way to her Lincoln Park neighborhood.

Jeez, she'd sure messed things up tonight. Who was stupid enough to run away the night before Thanksgiving? *Only you, Kitty*. She could hear her friends now when she told them about her night.

But Adam had gotten hurt and now she had to face her parents. They weren't going to be very happy with her.

"Why the long face?" He must have gotten tired of watching the scenery going by.

"I screwed up big time." She couldn't look at him and remind him of how she'd messed up his plans.

"They might be mad at first, but they'll be glad to have you home safe."

Karla felt him continuing to stare at her. She chewed on her lower lip; then finally got the courage up to look over at him. Over and up. *Jeez, he was tall, even sitting down*. The street lights lit his face—off, then on, then off again. She noticed the cut on his lip was still bleeding, but just a trickle. She wished she'd brought more paper towels.

Adam had fought to protect her tonight. He could have been killed. There were three of them and they'd had weapons! Instead, he'd saved her from

whatever that guy had wanted to do with her. Probably rape her, or make her a hooker, or even sell her to a sex-slave operation. She knew about these things. She watched enough TV.

What she didn't know was how she could ever get Adam to forgive her. Well, she'd be home in a few minutes and probably would never see him again. Still, she needed his forgiveness.

"Adam…I'm sorry I got you mixed up in this. And I'm really sorry you got hurt on account of me."

He was quiet for a little while, his eyes kinda sad again. She hated that she had made him sad this time. Then one side of his mouth tilted up in half a smile. The side that wasn't cut. Her stomach clenched every time she looked at his wound.

"I'd do it all over again to keep you safe. Just promise me you won't run away again. Next time, you might not be so lucky."

The cab stopped. She looked out the window and saw they were in front of her house. The porch light was on and Mom's goofy wreath with all the harvest vegetables on it was displayed on the door. A pumpkin sat on the post at the top of the stairs. The big brick house and hokey decorations never looked so good to her before.

Tears spilled down her cheeks. She probably looked like a raccoon again, but she didn't care. On impulse, she turned around and wrapped her arms around Adam, well as much of him as she could reach around. He had the hardest, widest shoulders she'd ever felt.

After a moment, he wrapped his arms around her, too. His arms felt good around her. She felt safe. She wondered what it would be like if he kissed her.

What the hell, Kitty?

He squeezed her really tight, making it hard to breathe. Or was the lack of air the result of her heart beating so fast? She decided to just let him hug her as tightly as he wanted. Ian had hugged her that way, too, before he'd left home the last time. Adam might not get to hug a girl again for a long, long time. Why, she was being patriotic to let him hug her. Although she had to admit that it felt really good to be in his arms.

He whispered, "Thank you," and she smiled through her tears. His whiskers scratched, tickling her ear.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Adam."

He pulled away, and she wished they could have kept hugging. "Same to you, Karla."

He was kinda cute when he smiled that way, without the sad eyes. "Oh, no! Where will you eat turkey today?"

“No problem. I usually have ham on Thanksgiving anyway…” Then his smile disappeared. *Double damn*. She’d made him think sad thoughts again.

“It’s probably best if I stay inside the taxi, in case your parents are watching. You have enough problems without having to explain what you’re doing hanging out with an old Marine.” He smiled. “But I’ll wait here until you get inside.” Then he grew serious again. “Just promise me you won’t run away again.”

She nodded. “I promise.”

Karla looked down at her backpack. Her throat hurt too much to speak, but, as she opened the door, she turned back and cleared it enough to whisper, “Promise me you’ll come home safe.”

“I’ll do my best, honey.” He looked away and repeated in a whisper. “I’ll do my best.”

Suddenly, Adam’s door whipped open and two hands reached inside to grab Adam by the shirt.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing with my sixteen-year-old daughter, you pervert!”

Karla leaned over to protect him, but Adam pushed her out of harm’s way, as if worried she might be hit by accident.

“Daddy, no! Don’t hurt him!”

What was she worried about Adam for? He could have decked Daddy with one hand tied behind his back. Maybe two. But Adam just let himself be pulled from the cab without putting up a fight. Karla scrambled across the seat and exited behind him. Adam stood with his hands at his sides. She moved to wedge herself between him and her dad.

Her Mom came running around the front of the cab and pulled he back. “Karla, get in the house!”

But Karla needed to get to Adam, if he wouldn’t defend himself. She’d never seen Daddy so angry.

“Not now, Mom.” She brushed her mom’s hand aside and went to where Daddy had Adam backed up against the trunk of the cab. Oh, God, he had his fist raised, ready to slam into Adam’s already injured face.

“Daddy, don’t!” Karla grabbed onto his arm and he stopped to look down at her. “He didn’t do anything to me. He rescued me. Twice!”

Daddy was breathing really hard. Definitely not in as good a shape as Adam. And yet Adam hadn’t even put up his arms in defense. Why not?

Daddy turned to Adam, “Maybe you’d better explain yourself.”

Adam opened his mouth, but Karla knew he’d downplay everything. He was way too modest. “Daddy, he fought off three jerks who wanted to hurt me. He

bought me dinner. He's a good man and if you hurt him, I'm going to run away again and I'll never come back!"

Adam looked down at her and she thought she heard him growl. She tried to ignore him, but knew he wasn't happy with her threat, even though she knew she wasn't going to run away ever again.

"Okay. I'm not going to run away." Both Adam and her father relaxed a little bit. "But on account of me, he missed his bus."

Daddy let go of Adam's now even more wrinkled shirt and stepped back. "You *protected* my Karla?"

"I just did what anyone would do."

"Don't listen to him, Daddy. There were *three* of them! And they had weapons. Adam was unarmed."

Adam glanced away and down at the ground.

"I don't want him to spend Thanksgiving sitting in the bus terminal until tomorrow night. Adam needs a place to stay tonight."

Oh, that got Adam to look at her again! But he didn't look very happy about it.

"Is that true? Do you need a place to stay?"

"No, sir. I'm fine. I've slept in worse places than a bus station."

Karla's mom wrapped her arm around Karla, but her words were directed at Adam. "Nonsense. If our son was in your situation, we'd hope someone would..." Mom's voice always broke when she talked about Ian now. "We'd be honored if you'd come inside."

"He can sleep in Ian's room," Karla offered.

"No, I don't want to impose."

Daddy looked from her to Adam. "If what Karla says is true, it's the least we can do for you for bringing our little girl home." He reached out his hand to Adam. "I'm Carl Paxton. Sorry about roughing you up."

Adam looked down at Daddy's hand for a few seconds.

Go on. Shake it.

When Adam finally reached out, she knew he'd be staying. She let out the breath she'd been holding.

"Adam Montague. Nice to meet you, sir."

"He's a master sergeant, Daddy. In the Marines!"

She wasn't sure what rank that was, but it sure sounded important. When Adam looked at her like he didn't need her help, she just smiled. She didn't have to say goodbye to Adam yet.

*

Adam let go of Paxton's hand. The man had a firm grip and an honest face. Karla's parents seemed like good people. What the hell was she thinking, running away from a nice safe home like this? If she were his daughter, he'd tan her hide.

Her dad looked down at Adam's mouth. "You're bleeding."

"It's nothing." Adam licked at his wound. He tasted the iron on his tongue.

"His shoulder's injured, too, Mom."

Karla's mom let her go and came at him like a mother hen. "I'm sorry. Let's get you in out of this cold. Where's your coat?"

Ahem.

Adam turned to see the taxi driver. Shit. He'd forgotten about him. He reached for his wallet, but Karla's dad put a hand on his arm. "Go with the girls. I'll take care of this. You've paid enough already." The man pulled several bills from his wallet.

Outmaneuvered, Adam suddenly felt too tired to argue. Opening the back door to the taxi, he reached inside to pull out his seabag, just as Karla leaned in the other side to get her things. She looked across the back seat at him and smiled.

Damn. He could see how she wrapped her parents around her little finger. Hell, he had to admit her smile worked on him, as well. He probably wouldn't have been able to tan her hide, either, even when she did deserve it. Her enthusiasm and innocence were sweet. He grinned back at her.

Before he had a moment to think, Karla and her mother flanked him and ushered him up the sidewalk. He looked up the steep stairs to the porch, noticing the pumpkin. Joni would have decorated their porch the same way. Fuck. He hadn't thought about his wife much since he'd gotten caught up in Karla's troubles.

God, Joni, I'm so sorry.

Guilt twisted his gut. In an instant, a deluge of two months of painful memories brought his mood back down to where it ought to be. What the fuck was he doing bringing his foul mood into this family's home on Thanksgiving Day? Just what the hell did he have to be thankful for? He turned around to stop the taxi, just as it pulled away from the curb.

What a clusterfuck.

With reluctance, he turned and began climbing the stairs to the porch, feeling each of the dozen steps in his shaky legs.

Paxton caught up with them and opened the door. To his wife, he said, "I'll make some calls to Karla's friends' parents and let them know she's home safe."

Inside, the house was warm. Smelled like cinnamon. Karla's mother led him to the kitchen, where she sat him down on a chair at the table for six. Several pies were lined up on the counter.

"Off with the shirt."

Adam hoped his expression conveyed to her that no fucking way was he removing his shirt. "I'm fine, ma'am."

She just laughed. "Don't go there with me. I'm a nurse. I've seen more naked bodies than you can shake a fist at. Off." Her fingers motioned for him to follow her order. "I am going to take a look at that shoulder, one way or another." When he still refused to move, she added, "Now!" She'd have made a great drill sergeant.

Adam looked over at Karla, who seemed to be waiting for a show to begin, her eyes wide open, chin propped on her palm at the island in the middle of the room. No fucking way was he going to let her see his back. He did a half turn in the chair.

Mrs. Paxton seemed to notice his discomfort. "Karla, run up to the bathroom and get me the new first-aid kit. There are some things missing from this one."

He saw the disappointment in the girl's eyes, but she did as she was told. She seemed like a good kid. He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off. God, the muscles in both shoulders ached, not just the bruised one. He was getting soft in his old age.

When Karla's mother moved around to check the damage from the back, he cringed when he heard her gasp. "You've seen your share, haven't you?"

"Mostly superficial, ma'am. I survived." Knowing she had a son in harm's way, he didn't add that two of his men hadn't made it out of that ambush alive. She traced a finger over the spot where he had his tattoo, but he let her draw her own conclusions. He wouldn't talk about it.

Adam recalled the ambush outside Kandahar that had taken out half his recon unit earlier this year as they'd tried to establish a foothold in the area. Two men dead, seven injured. Fucked-up mission. His shrapnel scars were reminders of his failure—his inability to bring all his men home. He prayed he'd never have a repeat of that day during his remaining time in the Corps.

Thankfully, she didn't ask. "I appreciate this, ma'am, but it's just a little bruise."

"Please, call me Jenny. And that bruise is going to be more than little. What did you run into?"

"Brass knuckles. Didn't duck fast enough. Getting old."

She scoffed. "From what Karla said, you fought off three guys. I just hope they look a lot worse than you do."

“Yes, ma’am. Two of them do, anyway. The third ran.” He felt a need to assure her that Karla hadn’t been harmed or in danger. “I didn’t let them near your daughter. She was out of there before any punches flew.”

She stepped back to face him. “Adam, we can’t thank you enough. When we found Karla’s bed empty an hour or so ago—”

Adam heard the catch in her voice and looked up to see tears swimming in her eyes. His gut twisted. He could well imagine her fears.

“We panicked,” she finished on a whisper. “The police wouldn’t even look for her for twenty-four hours. It’s not much, but please know we’re forever in your debt.”

“Sorry, Mom. It took me a while to—”

Adam looked toward the entrance to the kitchen to find that Karla had come to a dead stop, her jaw hanging open. Her eyes homed in on his naked chest. Shit, he’d embarrassed her. He reached for his shirt.

“Come on, girl. Don’t just stand there. Get over here.” When Karla remained stock-still, Jenny barked, “Now!” Then, to Adam, she stilled his movement to put his shirt back on. “Don’t you dare! She’s seen her brother’s bare chest a million times.”

*

Yeah, but Ian’s chest didn’t look anything like Adam’s.

Karla crossed the room, holding the kit out to her mom, but not taking her eyes off Adam’s muscular pecs and biceps. His skin was evenly tanned, not a single hair anywhere on his chest. She had a whole new appreciation for the anatomy lessons she’d had in health class, because they allowed her a chance to label all of his beautiful parts. Standing so close, she felt the heat radiating from his body, even more noticeable than it had been at the bus station.

Or was it just that her face was overheating?

Her mother worked to open the latch of the new kit while Karla continued her observations. His pectoral muscles bulged, hard-looking nipples protruding from dark brown areolas. Karla just stared at his nips. No, not the scientific term, but that's what her friends called them when they ogled the juvenile boys in their gym class. None of those boys had nips that looked like stone, though. Nothing like Adam’s.

She itched to reach out and touch one to see if it was as hard as it looked, but her mother would have made her leave the room if she did that. She wouldn’t risk that happening, so she clenched her fists at her sides.

Her gaze went lower. His abdominals were…well…. *Oh, my!* Now she knew why they called them a six-pack. She’d probably be able to bounce a quarter off

them if he were lying down. There was this valley between his abs she wanted to lick.

Oh, no, Kitty. Don't think about licking him!

Too late. Her face grew even warmer. What would Adam be like as a lover? Gentle, tender, forceful? Not that she had any experience with lovers or sex. None of the boys her age attracted her, and she'd always been more interested in her music career than in dating. But she'd watched lots of love scenes in the movies and on TV. Adam truly had the most beautiful upper body she'd ever seen in her whole life—real or make believe.

"Open this and hand me one of the swabs."

Her mother handed her a cellophane package with two Q-tips inside. With great reluctance, Karla tore her gaze away from Adam's chest, then, realizing how important this was, went to work with a new sense of purpose. If only her hands would quit shaking. She wanted to do this right. What if she didn't and he got an infection and a fever and maybe even died, all because his cut lip wasn't cleaned properly?

Without touching the cotton ends, she handed one swab to her mom and watched her dip it in a bottle of alcohol. She knew from experience that was going to hurt like a mother.

"This is going to sting," Mom warned.

You'd better believe it. Her mom rubbed the wet cotton over his split lip, holding his chin to keep him steady. Karla wished she could touch him like that. He closed his eyes, but didn't make a sound. Her stomach muscles clenched, as if she were experiencing the pain for him.

"There." Her mom laid the Q-tip on the paper towel she'd placed on the table. "Now let's get some antibiotic ointment on that lip."

Karla saw the tinge of pink on the Q-tip. Adam's blood. Tears sprang to her eyes. He'd been hurt because of her stupidity. She wished there was something more she could do to help him. She certainly couldn't kiss his lip and make it better. Although the thought caused her stomach to flutter again, like a flock of the butterflies was trying to escape. She flushed in embarrassment.

What would her friends think when they heard about her adventures with an older man tonight? And a Marine. *Oh, my!* They would be so jealous, especially when she told them he looked like Mark Harmon. Only Adam acted much more mature and noble than the Dr. McNeil character did.

Her mom brushed her thumb across the red marks on Adam's shoulder. "Not much I can do for the bruising, but I don't think there's a hematoma."

Karla's attention went to the long, thin mark where he'd been jabbed by something with evenly spaced points. Then she remembered that one of the guys

he had fought with had been wearing brass knuckles. Her knees buckled at the thought of them tearing into Adam's shoulder.

“Whoa, hon!” Adam reached out and grabbed her elbows to hold her steady. “Not too fond of the sight of blood?”

Karla felt her mom’s scrutiny, but couldn’t take her eyes off Adam. Where he held her arms, a tingle of electricity zinged up to her shoulders and neck, then down to her…. *Oh, my!*

“What's the matter with you, Karla?” Mom asked. “You've seen plenty of blood. Ian was always getting patched up.”

"I’m okay,” she whispered, because of the frog lodged in her throat. He smiled at her and she felt tears dripping down her face. He’d taken that hit on his shoulder for her. She ached to press her lips against it, the way her mother had kissed her boo-boos as a kid. Usually, the pain magically went away. She wanted to take Adam’s pain away.

He reached up and wiped the tears away from her face with his thumbs. She caught her breath, then totally forgot to breathe for a moment.

“I’m okay, hon. Believe me, this is nothing.”

"You should see ..." her mom began.

Adam reached out and placed a hand on Mom’s arm. They exchanged a look, as if they shared a secret Karla wasn't in on. Mom nodded. Karla felt the green-eyed monster of jealousy for the first time in her life.

More tears welled in her eyes. Frustration at not being able to touch him, to comfort him, or even to get him to notice her as a woman, ate at her. She was still just a kid in his eyes. If she touched him the way she wanted, he’d think she was a freak.

But that just made her want to touch him even more.

*

Adam tried to stay out of everyone’s way on Thanksgiving morning. He’d managed to catch a few hours of dreamless sleep, which was more than he could say for the last few months. Then Karla’s relatives had started arriving—grandmother, uncle, aunt, cousins. Adam hadn’t been in a huge family gathering for Thanksgiving since he was a kid, and he was feeling a bit claustrophobic.

Adam knew her family meant well, but he counted the hours until he could get on that bus tonight and start making his way home to Pendleton. He grabbed his jacket and slipped out the front door, hoping no one would notice. He needed some air. The jacket did little to keep the wind out. But, compared with the crowded, overheated house, the air felt good. After he’d walked a few blocks, the frigid wind began to seep into his still-aching bones and muscles. He’d

known Chicago was windy, but when the gusts were fifty miles an hour and the air temperature barely twenty, it was god-damned frigid.

He didn't know where he was headed until he arrived. Standing on the shore of Lake Michigan, the wind blowing ice crystals from the lake onto his face, Adam braced himself against the gusts. Gray clouds hovered over the surface, much like they did over Lake Superior.

He and Joni hadn't had much money when they'd married and all he could afford for a honeymoon was an off-season cabin rental at a park along Superior. It had been colder than a mother that November, too. Not that they'd wanted to venture out much. They were too busy exploring their newfound mutual interest in sexual bondage and each other's bodies.

Adam got hard picturing Joni tied spread-eagle and blindfolded as he tortured her tits with ice and a feather. She had the cutest damned giggle. He'd tried to use his stern Dom voice, but knowing she couldn't see him, he'd grinned every time she let out her little-girl giggle.

Damned wind was making his eyes water. He reached up to wipe the moisture from them, then his mind returned to the cabin. After two days of nothing but sex and sleep—maybe a little food, he couldn't remember—they'd bundled up and ventured out to walk along the icy shore, down to the lighthouse.

Joni was curious about everything and they'd probably spent two hours talking with the lighthouse keeper. Adam accused her later of shirking her wifely duties by delaying their return to the cabin. Her screams of outrage as he reddened her ass during her first erotic spanking had turned them both on so much, they didn't leave the cabin again the rest of the week.

Cold wetness on his cheeks brought him back to the present. He wasn't sure if they were brought on from the wind or his sorrow. He didn't care. No one was around to see him cry. For the first time since learning he was going to lose her, he just let himself feel the gaping hole in his chest where his heart had once been.

Joni had given his heart a safe harbor all these years, but he knew now it was time for him to haul anchor, reset his compass, and shove off into unchartered waters.

"Safe journey, little subbie. We'll meet up again someday."

The wind whipped the words away from him. He hoped they made their way to his dear, sweet Joni, wherever she was. He didn't dwell much on spiritual matters, but knew in his heart he and Joni would reunite one day.

Adam drew a ragged breath and pressed his thumb and forefinger against the bridge of his nose. He now knew he was ready to resume his duties at Pendleton or wherever they sent him. While he'd never forget Joni, he'd be able to

compartmentalize the memories and pain so they didn't take his focus off the mission at hand. He would never put his units in jeopardy because he couldn't let go of the past. Until this moment, though, he hadn't been sure he would be able to do that.

A sense of peace came over him. He almost thought he felt Joni's lips brushing his cheek, the way she did before they curled up with each other and fell asleep. Then he became aware of the icy pellets pounding his face as a lake-effect squall whipped up. He turned around to make his way back to Karla's house.

Standing a few feet away from him, as if on guard duty, shivering inside her coat, stood Karla.

"What the f…heck are you doing out here?"

Her teeth chattered as she tried to answer. He took off his jacket and put it on her to give her another layer of warmth, then wrapped his arm around her, hoping to infuse some heat into her thin body. "Let's get you back home."

"N-n-no, Adam. I have to tell you something."

Adam just pulled her along toward the house. "We'll talk when we get you out of this squall." She tried to dig in her heels, but he'd have none of it. Damned fool kid needed a caretaker.

He'd been dreading going back into the chaos at her house, but now he just wanted to get her inside as quickly as possible. She'd catch pneumonia out here. They got as far as her front door when Karla wedged her toe against the door and turned to look up at him.

"Wait! Adam, there's something you need to know, and I can't say this inside the house."

Adam tried to block as much of the wind from hitting her shivering frame as he could, but her black-and-pink hair lashed across her face. He reached out and tucked the wild strands behind her left ear because they distracted him from the conversation that seemed so important to her. What in the hell could she possibly have to say that couldn't be said inside?

Karla splayed her gloved hand on his chest, over his wounded heart, and looked up at him with those big sparkling blue eyes surrounded by that god-awful makeup and pink hair. She searched his eyes for a long moment, he didn't know for what.

Then he felt a niggling at the scar on the back of his neck—always a sign he wasn't going to want to deal with whatever was incoming. *Fuck*. He hoped she wasn't about to say what he thought she was getting ready to lay on him.

"Adam, I n-n-n-know you have a wife and y-y-y-you think I'm just a kid, but I want to t-t-tell you that…I l-l-love you."

Double fucking damn. He'd need a minesweeper to navigate these waters. *Joni, where are you when I need you?* She'd know how to deal with a sixteen-year-old's crush. She'd been surrounded by teenage girls at the Catholic school where she'd taught until last spring. *Help me out here, baby.*

"Hon, I love you, too." Crap. That didn't come out sounding right, but surely she'd know what he meant.

When her eyes lit up and she pursed her lips as if expecting him to kiss her, he turned his rudder hard to starboard. She'd definitely taken his words the wrong way.

"Like a *father*, Karla. Hell, I'm old enough to *be* your father."

When tears welled up in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks, his gut turned to mush. He always came undone when a woman cried. But, hell, Karla was just a kid. Why did her tears rip him apart even more? How in the hell had he let this happen?

Now, wait a minute there. He'd never given her any indication he wanted to be anything other than a guardian to keep her out of trouble. Fuck, he didn't know anything about teenage girls.

"Look, hon…" *Quit calling her hon, you frigging asshole*. "Look, Karla, I'm an old man. Your life is just starting. I'm sure there are lots of boys who'd—"

"But they're so immature. All they talk about is sports. I don't have anything in common with them."

What the hell did she have in common with an old worn-out Marine? God, he wished they made tactical maps for situations like these. He was fucking clueless how to fend off this attack.

"Nothing wrong with sports." *Oh, that's profound, jarhead.* Damn. He liked this kid a lot. Didn't want to hurt her for anything. But he wasn't a perv.

Just tell it like it is, man. You've never had any problem doing that before. What's different this time?

She's a kid! And a girl! I don't want to hurt her.

"Look, Karla. I like you a lot, but I don't feel that way about you." When the light left her eyes, he felt like a fucking heel. While he knew the words needed to be said, if it were physically possible, he'd have given himself a good roundhouse kick in the ass for whatever the hell he'd done to make her think he'd welcome this heartfelt declaration. How could he make it not seem like a rejection because there was something wrong with her? She'd make a fine girlfriend and wife for some guy someday. Just not him.

"I still love my wife." *Yeah, that's good. Let Joni pull your prick out of the fire*. He didn't have to tell her his wife was dead. Besides, he did still love Joni.

“You have some growing up to do. I’m sure you’ll meet someone one day who can love and respect you the way you should be loved.”

Karla tore herself away, opened the door, and ran inside.

He laid his forehead against the cold doorframe. What a fucking mess he’d made of that. Maybe it was a good thing he and Joni hadn’t had kids. He’d make a lousy father.

That fucking bus couldn’t get here soon enough.

*

Karla tried to eat all the food on her plate, but the lump in her throat, and Adam sitting across the table from her, made that impossible.

“Good news, Adam,” Daddy said, beaming. “I’ve managed to get you a ticket on a red-eye flight out tomorrow night. Direct to San Diego. You’ll be back on base in hours rather than days.”

Karla saw the stricken look on Adam’s face. He must be horrified to think of being stuck with her another whole day. Her eyes brimmed with tears and she hung her head down, hoping they’d fall right into her burgundy cloth napkin without leaving an embarrassing trail.

“That’s really not necessary, sir. I don’t mind—”

“It’s done. The least we can do after all you’ve done for us.”

Luckily, Daddy didn’t add to her embarrassment by spelling out to everyone at the table why they felt they owed this Marine something. But she and her parents knew. All her fault. A few hours ago, she’d have been thrilled to know Adam would be with her another day. Now she didn’t even know what to say or do with him.

Karla had teetered on the verge of crying since she’d been rejected by Adam on the front porch. Of course, she didn’t want to break up his happy marriage or anything. But he could have at least given her a little kiss to remember him by. She’d never find anyone like him to love ever again.

Adam continued to avoid looking at her. He didn’t eat much either, not even the casserole she’d made for him. Another rejection. More tears.

Grandma began sharing stories about her latest cruise and Karla zoned out until she heard Adam’s name.

“Adam, have you ever been to Mexico?” Grandma asked.

“Yes, ma’am. My wife and I went to Cabo San Lucas on a second honeymoon about ten years ago.” He cleared his throat. “Beautiful place.”

Well, even if he wasn’t happily married, he wouldn’t wait for you to grow up, Kitty. No, he was so handsome, he could have any woman he wanted. Besides, he didn’t even know she existed. Karla felt the lump growing in her throat and

put her useless fork down. She hoped this nightmare dinner would end soon so she could escape to her room and have a good cry.

Why had she so embarrassed herself on the porch? She needed to make conversation before her Mom hauled her into the kitchen for having such bad manners. Karla looked up at Adam. “I’ll bet you miss her a lot.”

His eyes got sad again and he looked down at his plate. “More than you’ll ever know.”

Yeah, he loved her. She was a very lucky lady. As if to keep from having to say more, he took a small bite of her casserole. She smiled.

Mom said, “Karla, your broccoli casserole gets better every year.”

Adam looked up at her as he chewed, smiling across the table. “Best I’ve ever had.”

Karla’s tummy squeezed tight and she smiled back.

After the dinner plates had been cleared, mom pulled out the Quiddler cards and dictionaries and everyone at the table played. Adam was pretty good at it, but Karla beat him in the last round with the word “domination.” That was the best word she’d ever gotten in the stupid game!

The next day went by in a blur, but Karla could never get Adam alone to apologize for her stupid scene. By the time she stood in the airport terminal saying goodbye, tears spilled down her cheeks. Her father already had said goodbye and thanked him, then had to go to his office at the other end of the terminal to check on some emergency.

Saying goodbye wasn’t easy. “Adam, please forget what I said on the porch. I was just being a stupid teenager. But I’ll never forget you. Thanks for rescuing me.”

He shuffled his feet, then seemed to decide something and met her gaze. “Karla, I know you aren’t going to understand this, but you’re the one who saved *my* life. I’d lost sight of what I needed…what was important to me since… well….”

She thought she saw a glint of tears in his eyes, but none fell. He looked down at the floor again. After a moment, he continued. His voice sounded like he’d swallowed sandpaper. When he looked into her eyes again, those freaky butterflies returned to her stomach.

“If you hadn’t shown up in that bus station two nights ago, Karla, I don’t know what…. I was heading back to the war without the fire in my belly. It’s my job to make sure my units survive their next missions and I….” He rubbed the back of his neck.

She wished she could give him a neck rub to calm him. He seemed so upset. Then his words registered. *Oh, no!* He was going to Afghanistan or Iraq. She

was sure of it. That's all she heard in the news now. Ian might be going to one of those places, too. They both might get killed!

Tears spilled down her cheeks again. Good thing she didn't wear mascara. She'd known she was going to cry when she said goodbye, just not how much. Suddenly, it was important that she not lose track of Adam. His wife and family would write to him, but Karla needed to know he was okay, too. He'd become such an important part of her life in the last two days.

"Can I—?" She cleared the frog from her throat. "Can I write to you, Adam?"

His gaze met hers and she thought he was going to say no, then he smiled—another really sad one. She bet he didn't think she'd actually follow through, because she'd acted like such a selfish teenager ever since he'd met her. But she would. Every day.

Well, at least once a week.

"I'd like that."

Before he changed his mind, she reached into her purse and pulled out a treble-clef-shaped writing pad. She wrote his name—well, he had to spell his last name for her—and then his APO address. Ian had an APO, too.

Well, duh, Kitty. All soldiers have those.

She vowed to herself she would also bake goodies to send them both. "Do you like brownies?"

He got that look where she knew he wasn't thinking about her anymore. Then he smiled. "Yeah. With peanut butter."

Karla giggled. She'd never made that kind before, but she'd learn. For her Adam. Maybe she could send him an MP3 recording of her singing. Her music teacher wanted to record demo tapes for her and another student to send to college admissions offices.

"Why don't you write down your address for me, too?" She looked up. He wanted to write to her? "I probably won't get around to writing very often, but I'll write when I can."

Karla scribbled down her address on the next sheet and tore it off to hand to him. She wished Adam would hug her, but he'd been very careful not to get anywhere near her since she'd made a fool of herself on the porch.

But what if she never saw him again?

Karla wouldn't risk never getting to feel her arms around him one more time. She closed the space between them and slipped her arms around his narrow waist. His sides felt like steel bands and his heart beat fast against her cheek.

"I'm going to miss you, Adam."

Just when she was about to let go, thinking he wouldn’t hug her back, she felt his arms surround her and pull her into his heated warmth.

Safe. Protected.

Adam. He’d always be her hero.

Section Two
Prequel to Damián's Story, *Nobody's Perfect*

September 2003, La Jolla, California

"Hey, boy!"

Damián Orlando looked up from bussing one of the isolated booths along the wall of the hotel restaurant to see some rich-looking dude at the booth in the corner waving at him. He did a slow burn at the condescending way the man in the white suit addressed him, but smiled as he'd been trained to do.

In the booth next to the man sat the most gorgeous blonde he'd ever seen. She reminded him of his little sister's Malibu Barbie doll—the one he'd decapitated accidentally while they were playing dragons and princesses as kids.

Her pale skin looked fragile enough to break, like his grandmother's china. She pursed her cherry-red lips. He'd enjoy kissing the lipstick off her full, sexy mouth. The thought of those full lips sucking his…

"When you're finished ogling my…date, would you mind asking our server to bring us the top-shelf wine list?"

The Barbie doll looked up at him and he saw the apology in her sad blue eyes. What did she have to apologize for? Her date was the jerk-off.

He looked at the man and clenched his fists. *Fucking jerk-off.* Damián smiled. "Yes…sir."

What was she doing with such an asshole? He shook his head. Understanding crazy rich people wasn't what he got paid for. He turned away from their table, happy to hide his hard-on.

"You didn't have to encourage him, slut." The man's hate-filled whisper carried across the nearly empty room.

"I didn't…"

"Just shut up. If you mess up this deal for us…"

Damián felt himself doing a slow burn. What the hell gave the jerk the right to talk to her that way? And why didn't she tell him to fuck himself up the ass? Hell, Damián had needed no encouragement to stare at her. She was freakin' perfection. But she'd kept her eyes down the entire time he'd *ogled* her, until right at the end anyway.

Stay out of it, man. You can't get into trouble again.

Damián went out to the patio and found their server schmoozing with some exec from a modeling agency. They'd approached Damián to model for them, too, but he wasn't interested. All the other restaurant staff were looking for a

way out of poverty. He was just happy to have a steady job with predictable hours—and to be out of juvie.

He glanced out at the ocean and breathed in the salty air. The cool evening breeze felt good against his skin. He'd been cooped up in juvie so long, he'd thought his soul had rotted. Now he spent his days cooped up in the restaurant. He was long overdue for a drive up the coast. Laguna Beach always settled him when he got restless.

After getting the server back inside, Damián followed. The dark wood paneling closed in around him again in an instant. While the white tablecloths, fresh flowers, and glowing hurricane-lamps on each of the tables and booths helped to lighten the room some, he couldn't figure out why someone would choose to dine inside on such a beautiful Southern California evening. He'd be out on the patio waiting for the sun to set—if he could afford to eat in a place like this.

Damián picked up the dish bin and glanced at the Barbie doll. A tear ran down her jaw as she fiddled with her fork. His gut churned as he turned toward the kitchen. That man had made her cry. His sister Rosa had been verbally humiliated that way by her now ex-husband. Then the man had become violent.

Rosa had come close to being put in her grave before Damián had forced her to move into his apartment. When Julio had come after her, Damián had punched his teeth out—and earned himself two years in juvie for his effort. But he'd do it again. No woman should ever be disrespected like that.

"*Keep a low profile and mind your own business, if you know what's good for you.*" The words of his social worker focused his mind where it belonged. He walked into the kitchen and loaded the dirty dishes into the racks. He sure as hell wasn't going to interfere for a total stranger. Even if her shithead date deserved to be pummeled for his remarks, he knew the man's money would get Damián's ass locked up so fast, his head would spin. At nineteen, the key would be conveniently thrown down a sewer hole this time.

No way could he afford to get fired, either. He still hadn't made rent money for next month. So, he'd just avoid the jerk-off and his perfect-but-miserable date. He hoped she'd wise up soon and dump him before it was too late. But that wasn't his concern. Just bus the tables.

Rich people sure were fucked up. Damián had grown up in a tiny ranch-style tenant house with too many mouths to feed and too little money. Growing up, he'd thought being rich would solve all their problems. From what he could tell, though, money just brought on a whole new set of them.

He looked at the clock. Three more hours before he got off work. He decided he needed to ride his Harley up the coast. The beach at Laguna called to him.

Away from everyone. Just him. The ocean. And his cave.

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Savannah Gentry tried to swallow past the lump closing up her throat. Despite nearly a year of Master's pimping out her body to his high-class business clients, she'd tried to learn to dissociate from scenes with clients as fully as she'd been able to do when only having to anticipate her Master's behavior. But there were too many clients to learn to predict them.

For the majority of her cognizant life, He had owned and controlled her—mind, body, and spirit. As far as she could recall—and large blocks of her life already had been blocked out of her memory—the rape and abuse began soon after her mother left. She was eight. She'd prayed every night for months for her Maman to come back and rescue her, but she never heard from her again.

At first, she'd been more angry at her mother than her father. How could she leave her there with such a monster? Although, Savannah didn't remember him being a monster until that night….

She shuddered. Escape had never been an option. Becoming self-sufficient was a pipe dream. Her Master had too much power in southern California for her to be able to escape Him. And He'd threatened to sell her to a pimp on the streets if she disobeyed. A shiver of fear coursed down her spine. At least with Him she was being tortured by a higher class of clientele, and, when she wasn't being pimped out, she was fed, clothed, even schooled in a fashion.

She watched the bus boy clear another table. She felt badly about the way Lyle, her Master's puppet, had treated him. Of course, she had been intensely aware of the bus boy's eyes on her. How could she not? He reminded her of the hero in her fantasies, Orlando Bloom. Just yesterday, in her Master's screening room, she'd seen a preview for Orlando's upcoming movie, *Pirates of the Caribbean.* Last night, she'd dreamed he had swung into her bedroom window on a rope tied to who knows what and whisked her away from her private Hell.

Was that why she couldn't take her eyes off the Orlando look-alike across the room? The bus boy's shoulder-length hair was pulled into a queue at the nape of his neck. He sported the same goatee and moustache Bloom had had in the movie trailer.

Savannah wondered what his moustache would feel like against her face. Her lips. Her breasts. She was surprised to find she wasn't fantasizing about Orlando now, but the bus boy. The way he had clenched and unclenched his fists as Lyle tried to humiliate him, he looked as if he were ready to punch Lyle in his asinine mouth for his ridiculous accusations.

Someone willing to defend her honor. *Well, that would be a first.*

Out of the corner of her eye, Savannah watched as the bus boy lifted the heavy bin of dishes. The muscles in his forearms corded and his biceps bulged under his polo shirt. Judging by the front of his pants, they weren't the only things bulging.

And there the fantasy ended. Typical man.

From the first time her father had raped her, sex had equaled pain, control, torture. Until she'd turned eighteen and He'd lost interest in raping her. But she hadn't gained her freedom. Instead, He and His junior partner, Lyle, had prostituted her as their pain slut for the past year, using her well-trained masochist's body to solicit new clients for their firm.

For whatever twisted reason, her father had prohibited clients—or even Lyle, for that matter—from penetrating her. They could torture her as much as they pleased. But no intercourse. *Thank God for small favors*.

Why anyone would engage willingly in the sex act was beyond her. She preferred her romantic dream lover, Bloom, over the bus boy or any real man. The bus boy was like all the rest, ogling her body and becoming aroused without knowing anything about her other than what she looked like. He didn't care if she had a brain in her head. No different from all the men she'd ever known.

All were sadists, getting off on a woman's pain. Ah, and into the restaurant just walked her next two clients. Lyle puffed himself up.

"Here they come."

Savannah quaked to her core to think how much Lyle reminded her of her father. She wouldn't be surprised if Lyle was slated to inherit her body after her father died. No, there wouldn't be a "slave clause" in His public will. But she was certain her father would never release His hold over her, even from beyond the grave.

Her lungs clenched, squeezing out the meager amount of air in them. Some days, she actually welcomed death over continuing to exist this way. Ah, the ultimate betrayal of the obedient slave—to execute the body the Master thought He owned. Her only regret would be that she wouldn't have the pleasure of seeing the look on her father's and Lyle's faces as she reclaimed control over her body.

Razor blades? No, too messy. Pills? She'd read that as few as a dozen Tylenol would shut down a person's liver. What would a whole bottle do? Would death be fast? Painless? Well, it couldn't hurt more than what she'd experienced the last eleven years. Yes, when she got home tonight, she would put an end to this miserable existence.

A sense of peace came over her. The time for the ultimate release had come. She smiled, her lips quivering.

“That’s good, baby. Smile. You know, I prepared you for these guys a month ago. They’re going to love finding your secret. They love shit like that.”

When Lyle’s words registered, bile rose in her throat. If she’d eaten today, she’d have vomited. Last month, Lyle had restrained her face down on her father’s desk in the home that should have been her haven. Her legs had been spread open and secured, while her father’s weight held her down so she would remain still enough.

Her stomach clenched into knots as memories of her shrill screams bouncing off the walls in her Master’s office resurfaced in her psyche. No one but her Master and Lyle could have heard her. The waves of pain had come so fast, so intensely, she hadn’t been able to escape to her safe place. When the pain became too unbearable, she’d fainted. Her father revived her by pouring ice water on her face. Gasping, she’d returned to consciousness just as the fire began again on the inside of her labia.

Her heart pounded as she remembered returning to her room that night. The raw pain hadn’t receded. She’d taken a hand mirror and, lying on her back on the bed, discovered her latest degradation.

Branded with her father’s initials.

The branding had healed with much care. But Lyle’s sadistic appetites began to frighten her more than her father’s. Would she survive having her father’s protégé become her Master? Throat suddenly parched, she reached for her water goblet, trying to quell the shaking in her hand.

A heavy weight settled in her stomach as Lyle stood to greet the two Asian men in their matching black-silk suits and starched white shirts—twin-like right down to their black-silk ties. Savannah didn’t attempt to stand, because she’d been strategically placed at the enclosed side of the round table. No escape.

The men bowed in sync to Lyle. He ate up their deference to him with a simpering grin. The three exchanged terse introductions. Then, as one, all three turned their attention toward her, the gazes of the clients creeping slowly over what they could see of her body, lingering too long on her breasts. She swallowed down the rising bile and forced a smile to her face.

Lyle motioned for each man to enter the booth from a different side. The short, wiry men slid along the circular leather seat to besiege her, closing in. Smothering. She tried to fill her compressed lungs with slow, deep breaths, but the men reeked of garlic and body odor. She fought the reflex to gag.

As if in synchronized motion again, their hands snaked out to clamp over her knees, then moved upward, under the short skirt of her tight dress. The sadist on her left pinched her inner thigh, forcing a gasp from her.

Savannah needed to prepare herself for whatever these two men had planned for her. Focus. Separate her mind from the scene. Soon she would put this last scene behind her and go home. Then the slave would suffer no more.

She knew the routine. A quick meal, prolonged only if they got off on feeding the slave, then they would take her to the Master's penthouse suite—His because He owned this hotel, just as He owned the slave. Her screams would fall on deaf ears in that isolated wing of the historic hotel. The scene would be videotaped to use as blackmail with the clients later, if necessary.

Just another routine SM scene for the well-used slave. Lyle, who would wait in the next room, would never come to intervene. The slave would hold off screaming as long as she could, because no amount of screaming would put an end to the slave's suffering. Besides, the slave knew sadists got off on her screams and didn't want to give them the satisfaction of believing they had broken her.

Even after they ejaculated on her, as they always did, she knew the torture would end only when the allotted time had run out. No sense rushing them. Sometimes they became even more sadistic after they'd come. She prayed they'd only paid for an hour, but something told her they'd been able to afford to abuse the slave even longer.

Just be nice to the gentlemen, Savi, and they'll be nice to you. Only the "gentlemen" were never nice to her. Savannah took a deep breath.

The curtain rose on Act Three—the final act.

*

Damián stuck his head through the open elevator doors and saw a tray of dirty dishes on the floor outside the penthouse suite. He pushed the cart into the hallway, wheeling it toward the room. He started to bend down to retrieve the tray of dishes when he heard a woman scream in pain from inside the suite.

"Acccchhhhh, God, no!"

Damn. He didn't have a key to the room.

"Lyle! Make them stop!"

Were they screams of passion? Or did she need help? This floor was isolated from the others. He should at least check on her. But he had no way of gaining access to the suite.

"Acccchhhhhh! Rape!"

Mierda. Was this for real or a role-playing thing some *chicas* got into? Sure didn't sound like she was having fun. Damián dropped the dishes into the cart, breaking a wine glass. He pounded on the door.

"Everything all right in there?"

"Fire! Fire! Help me!" The woman sobbed now.

What the hell was going on in there? Damián ran back toward the elevator and pulled the fire extinguisher from the wall, then returned to the door. His heel striking against the handle barely made a dent at opening it. After three more kicks, the door finally crashed against the inner wall.

"Fire! Help!" The screams came from the bedroom. "No more, please!" she begged hysterically.

Damián ran through the fancy suite with its antique furniture and around the wet bar to try the bedroom doorknob. Unlocked. Hoping for the element of surprise, he slowly turned the handle until he felt the tumbler release, then slammed the door open. As it hit the wall and bounced back, he dodged the recoil and rushed into the room.

What the fuck?

The fire extinguisher dropped to the floor. On the bed in front of him, the Barbie doll from the restaurant was trussed up in a grotesque position. The soles of her feet were red. Her naturally blond pussy was splayed open for God and everyone to see. Red, angry welts covered her inner thighs. White nylon ropes suspended her knees in the air, attaching her to the headboard.

Her eyes were closed, but her face was red, with tracks of tears down both cheeks. The sight of her ravaged body tore at his gut.

When he'd first burst in, the two Japanese-looking men she'd had dinner with had stood naked on either side of her. They'd turned to look at Damián, then dropped some kind of glowing purple globe onto the bed. With frantic hand gestures and short orders to each other in a foreign language, they gathered up the various items on the bed—a quirt, a short bamboo cane, additional rope, that purple globe thing—and stuffed them into their briefcases.

Had they just been into a severe BDSM scene? An ex-girlfriend right out of juvie had been into that shit and had explained to him how it all worked. Damián couldn't get off on hurting a *chica*, so they'd broken up soon after. *Shit, maybe "fire" was her safe word?* But if she'd said her safe word, why hadn't they stopped?

The men quickly put on their boxers and suit pants, then grabbed their shirts and suit coats and ran out the door. The mud in his brain was clearing and it became obvious to him she wasn't a willing participant. *Fuck.* He ran to the bed but didn't know what to do first.

She whimpered incoherently, her face turned away from him. Her tits were bound so tight, they had turned bluish-purple. He reached out to untie those ropes first. Tears streamed down her face and she muttered gibberish. Her eyes were closed and her face turned away from him, flushed.

Fuck! Fuck!! Fuck!!! Where'd those guys learn to tie knots?

“Hang on, *querida*. I’ll have you out of here in a minute.” *I hope. Come on! Untie, God damn it!*

His heart pounded against his chest as he fought to make headway with the ropes. Finally, they loosened. A few seconds later, she screamed again as blood began circulating to her breasts. Damián wished he could absorb her pain into his own chest, but was afraid to touch her and cause even more pain. He reached for the wrist cuff on her left side and released her.

“Oh, God! Stop!” Her screams left him feeling even more helpless. He’d vowed never to feel that way again once he’d been released from juvie.

“I’m sorry. I know that hurts like hell, *bebé*.” He lowered her hand slowly onto the bed and rubbed her shoulder, trying to relieve the stiff and sore muscles. He followed the rope that splayed her thighs open and reached behind the headboard again to find it looped around what felt like an eye hook. He released it, and then kept the rope taut until he could grab her battered thigh and gently lay her leg onto the mattress.

Her screams of anguish caused his gut to clench. He was hurting her, but knew she’d feel better once circulation returned and her muscles relaxed.

He rushed around to the other side of the bed to unfasten those restraints. How long had she been tied up? He’d seen her leave the booth with the three men about an hour ago. Where was the fucking jerk-off in the white suit who’d brought her here in the first place?

Was she some kind of hooker or something? Didn’t matter. No one deserved to be tortured like this.

He released the wrist cuff and lowered her arm, then did the same with the ropes holding up her other thigh. Now freed, she cried out and curled her beautiful body into a ball, trying to minimize the pain and comfort herself. He froze, unsure what to do next. Her sobs ripped his fucking heart out.

When she began to shake, his mind engaged again and he retrieved the sheet and blanket that had been tossed on the floor at the foot of the bed. He tucked them around her trembling body, cocooning her in warmth. Still, she shook from the release of the stress on her body. Endorphins, his ex-girlfriend had explained —like it was a good thing. Maybe it was for his ex, who’d enjoyed that shit. But not for this girl.

“What the hell are you doing in here?”

Damián looked up to see the jerk-off from the restaurant standing in the doorway with his fancy phone in his hand.

“Who let you in here, wetback?”

Wetback? His family probably had been in California longer than this man’s.

The man turned to look at the woman. “Savannah, what the hell happened to my clients?”

Savannah. Beautiful, just like her.

“They were hurting her,” Damián said. He clenched his fists to keep from bashing in the man’s face. The jerk-off knew exactly what had been happening to her.

The man glared at him. “Well, no shit, Sherlock. The bitch gets off on pain—and I get off on making money.” So maybe she *was* being paid to do this. The jerk-off looked down at Savannah again. Damián was glad she couldn’t see the expression of anger and disgust on his face.

“Looks like neither of us is going to get off today, slut. Get the fuck up!”

When he went to the bed and grabbed Savannah’s arm, a gut-wrenching scream poured from her. Damián had had enough. He grabbed the man by the back of his suit coat and pulled him away from her. “Get the fuck out!”

The man stood and addressed him as if he were a bug to squash under his shoe. “Who the hell do you think you’re talking to, wetback?”

“*Keep a low profile and mind your own business…?”*

Fuck that shit. When the man took a swing at his face, Damián blocked it with his left forearm, then rammed his right fist into Jerk-off’s soft underbelly. The man doubled over, gasping for air. Damián waited to deliver another blow, but the man reached out for the nightstand and straightened up. He obviously hadn’t grown up in Damián’s neighborhood. Finished with one blow. Some tough guy.

His voice came out like a wheezing whisper. “You’re going to regret this.”

But Damián knew he’d have more regrets if he’d let the man hurt her any more.

*

Savannah pulled into herself, trying to escape the fiery pain. She could no longer identify one single source of discomfort. Nerve endings over her entire body screamed for relief.

Go to your cave, Savi. I am waiting.

She drifted toward the ceiling, out the window to the balcony, up the coast to the cave where she’d sought refuge so many times before. The waves crashed against the rocks. She walked carefully over the jagged edges, dodging sea urchins. Her flip-flops slipped as she climbed over the sharp rocks.

But this time, he pursued her. Faster. Run faster! He was close. So close. He grabbed her and pulled. The pain! Oh, God. She jerked away from him and ran faster. He let go just as she walked under the natural rock arch carved over

centuries by water and wind. The sounds of the waves died down. The pain receded.

"*Maman!"*

Her mother had spread a picnic lunch on a blanket for them to enjoy. When she smiled and held out her hand, Savannah glided forward, her feet just hovering over the sand.

Safe. At last.

Savannah sank to the blanket and took Maman's slender hand. She shivered. The air was cooler than usual inside the cave. Savannah stretched out on the blanket and laid her head in Maman's lap, curling her legs up to her chest. Maman stroked her hair away from her face. She was always brushing the tangles from her long curls.

A shudder wracked Savannah's body. Maman wrapped her in a warm blanket. Savannah didn't remember seeing the blanket when she'd arrived. She smiled. Maman worked magic. She always knew how to make their time together here perfect.

The waves crashed far in the distance, but they couldn't reach them here. A door slammed.

A door? In her cave?

Savannah's brows furrowed.

"Here, *querida*. Drink this."

She groaned. *No!* How had he found their secret cave? She fought against the man pulling her away from Maman. She sputtered and gasped as water entered her mouth. He captured her flailing hands. Was he trying to drown her? When had the tide come in?

"Shhh. He's gone. Drink the water. It will help. You're safe now."

No, not safe until you're gone. Leave us alone.

She clutched at Maman's dress. "No!" But he pulled her away, dragging her over the sand-encrusted rocks that bit into her skin. Raw. On fire. She fought him, but he continued to tear her from her safe place. From Maman.

Someone screamed in anguish. Then the fiery pain washed over her thighs, pussy, and breasts and she realized it was she who screamed. A strong, hard body pulled her against him, wrapping a steel-banded arm around her waist and arms, holding her tight.

Claustrophobia. Smothering. She tried to push at him, but his chest was as hard as the rocks on the beach. Only smoother.

"I have you, *querida*. No one's going to hurt you as long as I'm here. Just breathe slowly."

With an effort, she managed to return her breathing to normal, as he'd told her to do. He spoke Spanish. The sadists hadn't. His voice was gentle, oddly soothing to her jagged nerves, despite being a man's.

Her chest hurt so badly, her nipples ready to explode. Ropes, quirt, electricity.

Good God! No, there was no God, good or otherwise. She moaned as images flooded her mind—the purple globe shocking her pussy and breasts. She'd tried so hard not to scream. She hadn't wanted to give the sadists that satisfaction. But the pain. Oh, God, the pain had been the worst ever. She gasped on a sob.

"Shhhh, *bebé*. It's over now."

A strong hand stroked her hair. Comforting, but firm.

Safe.

At last.

Sleep now, Savi.

"Yes, Maman."

*

Damián knew the moment she'd fallen asleep. Her body released its tension and she relaxed against him. Well, he'd never been mistaken for someone's mother before. He smiled and pulled her closer.

She felt so fragile in his arms, as if he could break her if he touched her the wrong way. Her long, sun-streaked blonde hair was sleek and straight. He wanted to run his hands through it, but didn't want to wake her. Instead, he pressed his face against her hair and inhaled her scent. Flowery. Clean.

An hour passed and she continued to sleep, not moving a muscle. Damián expected the police to arrive at any moment—but no one came. He couldn't move her yet, certainly not on his Harley. Damián eased away from her and went into the sitting room to prop a chair against the suite entrance. He locked the bedroom door. Better than nothing. Might at least keep Jerk-off away from her.

What the hell kind of security did this place have? Hell, he'd busted down her door and no one had come to check. He returned to the bedroom and crawled back into bed beside her. If any of those dickheads came around her again, he wanted to make sure he stood between her and them.

No way would he leave her here alone. He'd take his chances with the authorities, even though he knew what would happen if they arrested him. Chicanos didn't assault rich white men and get away with it.

He looked down at her again. So defenseless. She needed him. He didn't understand what had drawn him to her, right from the moment he saw her in the restaurant. But he knew he needed to protect her. She sure as hell didn't make good choices when it came to men. Why would anyone subject herself to this

kind of pain and degradation? Was she a call girl? Still, he couldn't accept that she was a common *puta*.

"*The bitch gets off on pain.*"

Wrong again. She hadn't enjoyed the pain those men had inflicted on her. So, why had she put herself in such danger? Safe, sane, and consensual. That was his ex-girlfriend's mantra for BDSM scenes, but this one had been none of the above.

Savannah needed someone to look after her.

Well, she isn't going to take a second look at you. Way out of your league, man.

She moaned and turned her face toward him. When she wrapped an arm around his waist, Damián felt his dick harden. She licked her full lips and he fought the urge to bend over and kiss her.

Protect her, Damián. No la moleste.

No, she didn't need that from him, too. Just hold her. But if he was going to get rid of his hard-on, he'd better think about something other than the perfect *chica* sleeping in his arms. He steered his mind in a different direction. One thing he knew he could kiss goodbye—his job. Damn. He didn't want to be homeless again. But, without this job, he wouldn't be able to pay the rent.

Sometimes rescuing women wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

His social worker had suggested he join the Marines. They'd feed, clothe, and house him. Might get his fool head blown off in the bargain. But maybe not. Whatever he was going to do, he needed to come up with a plan and soon.

First, he needed to get this woman home safely. But if home meant taking her back to Jerk-off, then what? He couldn't do that.

Another hour passed. Still no security or police. What the fuck? Hadn't the man reported him?

The woman slept in his arms as if dead. After she'd turned toward him, she hadn't moved again. If he didn't feel her breath on his chest at the vee in his shirt, he would have tried to awaken her to be sure she was okay.

Damián was content to let her sleep. He'd never again hold something so perfect in his arms. He closed his eyes, giving in to exhaustion. She wasn't going anywhere. Neither was he.

She moaned and his eyelids opened in an instant. What time was it? Still dark outside. He pulled back and looked down at her. She grimaced. Without warning, she began thrashing against him, one fist slamming into his eye socket. Damián didn't try to hold her captive because he didn't need her screaming rape. No way did he have the money or power to fight a charge like that.

"Savannah, open your eyes."

Surprisingly, she did as he ordered, blinking several times as she stared at him. “Orlando?”

How did she know his name? His nametag only gave his first name. When her blue eyes finally focused on him, they opened wider and she scooted away to the opposite side of the bed. Her movements were awkward due to the abuse her body had sustained. She pulled the sheet with her and covered herself.

“Who are you?”

“Damián. Do you remember what happened?”

*

The man looked familiar to Savannah, but she couldn’t place him. Why had she been sleeping with him? She never slept with clients. But he certainly didn’t look like any client she could recall either. And why, if she’d just been asleep, did she want to curl up and escape into sleep once more?

The pain slowly registered. Her body burned from the soles of her feet to her breasts, but she couldn’t remember why. Savannah looked around the room. Opulent antique French furniture. Her mother’s influence. Tears stung her eyes. The penthouse suite. Familiar. She’d been here many times in the last year.

Then the memory of her last two clients returned.

Ropes. Quirt. Electricity.

Each time she’d managed to separate her mind from the clients’ horrific scene, the two sadists had become more relentless in torturing her with whatever device they were using at the time. Sometimes two at once. They seemed determined to keep her mind emotionally invested in the scene, ruthlessly pulling her back into her body to feel each blow, each infliction of pain.

Then one of the men had pulled out his smart phone, spread her private folds, and taken several photos of her shame. They had known she’d been branded. Heat suffused her face. She closed her eyes.

What now? Lyle and her father would be furious. She’d never lost them a client before. Last night, she’d lost two. Her punishment would be severe. She opened her eyes and glanced toward the door. Where had Lyle gone? When would he be back? She supposed her father would send a car for her. They knew they didn’t have to worry about her running away. The threat of living a hellish life as a street whore would keep her tethered in her velvet chains.

Savannah began to shake.

“Shhh. It’s okay.” The man on the bed—Damián—reached out a hand to her, but she pulled her body away. He let his hand come to rest on the mattress between them, as if he were training a dog to get used to him by small degrees. His brown skin contrasted sharply with the white sheets. Exotic. So different from the men who could afford her.

No, he wasn't her client. That she knew. So who was he? She shivered and returned his gaze, seeing regret, pity. She didn't want or need anyone's pity.

"I don't know you."

"I work here at the hotel."

Oh, Lord! The bus boy! She remembered him from the restaurant. How had she come to be in bed with him? Had anything happened? Clearly, she'd zoned out. Had he forced himself on her while her mind was out of her body?

No. The concern in the man's warm-chocolate eyes told her he wasn't a threat. She didn't think so, anyway. His pupils were so large, his eyes almost looked black. Her instincts regarding men were more than a little warped. Still, something began to melt inside her. The image of him barging into the room last night carrying a…a fire extinguisher? She tried to keep from smiling, but couldn't help herself. So incongruous with the type of rescue she'd needed.

Damián raised an eyebrow, then smiled back. His white teeth against a bronzed face sent a flock of swallows to flight inside her stomach. She giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"You, barging in here last night carrying that ridiculous fire extinguisher."

"*Someone* yelled 'fire.'"

"Well, I read once that no one comes when you yell rape."

His face grew serious. "They didn't—?"

She shook her head. "No. Against the rules." Tears stung the backs of her eyelids. "No one's ever come to my rescue before." She turned away. *Don't let him get inside your head, Savi*. This stranger was even more dangerous than the sadists. He made her feel vulnerable. She needed to keep her wits about her if she was going to keep the walls of her fortress intact.

Until she could get home and put her final plan into motion, she'd do well to remember that men weren't safe or honorable.

But Damián had held her for hours without taking advantage of her. Amazing man.

She looked back at him. "Thank you."

"*De nada*."

Then she realized what his actions had cost him. "Oh, God. Your job."

A bus boy probably needed every paycheck just to survive. She assessed him. He wore a polo uniform shirt—which he filled out better than any polo she'd ever seen—and inexpensive black jeans.

He shrugged, as if it didn't matter. But she doubted he was truly that nonchalant. He'd be fired, if he hadn't been already, all because of her. Unfair. Yet another victim of her father's and Lyle's ruthlessness. His face blurred as tears welled in her eyes. "I'm so sorry to have caused you so much trouble."

He leaned closer. She didn’t back away this time, but her heart began beating faster.

“I’d do it again,” he whispered. “No regrets, Savannah. No one should hurt you like that.”

She closed her eyelids and swallowed. Damián’s fingertip brushed away a tear that rolled from the corner of her eye. His hand felt warm against her chilled skin. A jolt of electricity zapped her clit—and not the kind of zap the sadists had delivered, either. Her eyes opened wider. No man had ever caused a sexual response in her.

When he pulled his hand back, she fought the urge to lean toward him. How could she feel so safe with this stranger?

Dangerous. She needed to get away before he got under her skin. She instinctively knew that opening herself up to his kindness would just result in even more intense pain when she left him to return to Master. Her life, her body, were not hers.

“I have to get home.”

Savannah didn’t know what would happen when she got there. Her father would be furious when Lyle told him what she’d done. She looked around the room. Where was the camera? Were they watching her even now? Her skin crawled. Were they waiting for Damián to leave so they could whisk her back to her prison on the hill in Rancho? Her failure would be severely punished.

Again, for a man who espoused no regrets, she did see regret in Damián’s eyes. “Why don’t you get dressed? I need to go clean out my locker. Can you meet me in the lobby in twenty?”

“Sure.” She pushed the sheet aside, but groaned at the pain of moving.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “My legs are sore.”

“Damn. Let me run downstairs and get the first-aid kit.”

“No, really! I’m fine.”

“Bullshit. Lock the door behind me and don’t open it for anyone but me. I’ll be right back.”

He didn’t wait for her to agree, just left the room. She hobbled over on her sore feet and locked the door behind him, then went to the bathroom to relieve herself. She then washed her thighs with soapy water. At least there weren’t any open cuts. Just red welts. She rinsed the washcloth and wiped her legs free of soap, then heard a knock at the door. Her heart thudded until she heard a familiar voice.

“It’s Damián!”

She grabbed a towel and went to the door to let him back inside. He administered first-aid efficiently, as if he was used to taking care of others.

"Where'd you get your first-aid expertise?"

"I have a niece who's a tomboy. She's always in one scrape or another."

She watched his brown hands against her white thighs as he gently applied antibiotic cream before taping gauze to the insides of her thighs. Then he washed her feet. She'd never had anyone take care of her needs in such a long time. Not since Maman.

"How does that feel?"

"Better." She smiled. "Thanks, Damián."

"*De nada*. Let me help you get dressed. I'll carry you down the back stairs so we can get out without alerting security."

"You don't have to carry me."

He glanced at her feet, then back at her face. "I'm carrying you."

He retrieved her black dress, bra, and panties from the chair in the corner and helped her dress. She felt like a child, and blushed knowing she wasn't. She lifted her arms and he slipped the dress down her torso as she sat on the edge of the bed.

Damián stood back, looking down at her. "Hope you won't mind riding on the back of my Harley."

An image of her legs wrapped around him caused her nipples to harden. She watched him glance down at them, which caused them to grow even harder. Her face reddened, then he raised his gaze to her eyes. His grin caused her clit to throb. Oh, Lord. Her breasts had done the talking for her.

"Good, *querida*."

Oh, Savannah, you're so close to ending your suffering.

Don't do anything stupid and screw it up.

*

Damián throttled the engine and peeled out of the parking lot. The feeling of control the hog gave him as it responded got the blood rushing through his body in a way nothing else could. Okay, maybe there was something else that could charge his engine. Like the beautiful woman plastered against his back and hips right now. He grinned.

The Harley was the only thing he'd ever been able to call his own. He'd worked for a Harley-Davidson repair shop and saved every penny until he could buy his own used chopper. It had been a total piece of crap when he'd bought it, but he'd restored it himself over the past year and could now interpret every rumble the engine made. He hoped he wouldn't have to sell his baby to make ends meet, not after all the time and money he had put into her.

Savannah's arms held him tight around the waist, her hands pressing into his stomach. He tried not to think about her sexy legs molded against his hips and thighs. His dick hardened. That she'd been game to ride on his bike surprised him. She didn't seem like the type who'd want to get her hair mussed. And she sure as hell wasn't dressed to ride. He'd made her wear his leather jacket, but it barely covered her black cocktail dress.

Savannah sure was full of surprises.

The pre-dawn traffic was light as he rode down Marine Street in La Jolla. Savannah was a natural on the bike, leaning with him as he made turns and lane changes. Now if only he could curb the ache of wanting to bury his dick deep inside her. Between the vibration of the machine and her body pressed against his back, ass, and legs, he felt like he'd explode. *Mierda*. He rolled on the throttle and catapulted them onto the 5. When she grabbed his waist even tighter, he grinned. Damn, she felt good against him.

Palm trees and scrubby evergreens dotted the sides of the road. The Pacific stretched out forever to the west. She'd given him her father's address in Rancho Santa Fe. Not that it was any of his business, but he couldn't help but wonder why someone from a rich neighborhood like Rancho would let men treat her with such disrespect.

He lived in La Colonia where he'd grown up, the Solana Beach neighborhood now known as Eden Gardens. It had sprung up in the shadow of Rancho to house the workers for the wealthy Rancho residents. His Chicano grandparents and father had immigrated from Mexico in the 1930s and worked for Rancho millionaires for decades. His mother, a sixth-generation Californian, had been a housekeeper behind the gates of one of the Rancho mansions. He'd lived in the shadow of the Rancho decadence all his life.

Now he had one of their daughters on the back of his Harley. Wasn't that a pisser? What would her family think when he rolled up at their door to drop her off? He grinned. As much as he couldn't wait to see that, he'd much rather enjoy their brief time together staying in the moment.

She laid her helmeted head against his shoulder and his dick jerked. *Mierda*. Yeah, he definitely needed to stay in this moment. But he couldn't help but wonder what the hell she was doing trusting him, a freakin' stranger, like this. How did she know he wouldn't just take her to some isolated place to rape and kill her? He remembered the torture she'd undergone yesterday. This *chica* had some serious problems with setting boundaries and making healthy choices about men.

Soon he would have her back in her safe little world, thankfully, before they did something she'd regret later. He wouldn't regret anything he did with her,

though. No fucking way.

Luckily, her exit was coming up. Soon he'd have her safe at home. He hoped she wouldn't venture out on another escort assignment anytime soon with Jerk-off.

As he came to the end of the ramp, she lifted the visor and shouted in his ear, "Don't take me home yet."

He just about blew a wad in his pants. Whether it was her warm body against him, her sexy voice in his ear, or visions of having her body underneath his, he knew in an instant where he wanted to take her before he let this *mariposa* flit away for good. He'd never taken a *chica* there before….

Don't analyze it. Just point the front tire in the right direction.

He turned left and wove his way through the business and residential districts of Solana Beach, and then became one with the sea air as he accelerated. Riding eighty miles an hour along the Pacific Coast Highway and the 5 always recharged his batteries. He'd begun escaping here as soon as he'd learned to drive. As a sixteen-year-old, he'd made the trip in a beat-up Chevy.

Being locked up in juvie had nearly strangled his soul. When they'd released him, he'd spent about two weeks at Thousand Steps Beach, sleeping on the cliffs at high tide, and exploring the beach and cave at low.

Don't think about that now. You have a beautiful woman plastered against your body, man. Focus.

Damián hoped she didn't mind stairs. He loved how few people frequented this beach—probably because of those daunting stairs. Almost like having his own private beach. He couldn't wait to share the place with Savannah. His heartbeat sped up as they came upon the outskirts of Camp Pendleton.

Wouldn't be long now.

*

Savannah's body had never felt so relaxed. She'd have fallen asleep, if not for the fear of falling off his Harley. She grinned. Savannah Gentry riding a Harley hog. *Good Lord.* And in a skintight dress covered in a leather Harley-emblazoned jacket, no less.

She suppressed a giggle. Escape. The feeling was so exhilarating. She never wanted this moment to end. She already knew she was in for the discipline session of a lifetime. Might as well do something to earn it.

She raised her head and looked around. The rising sun cast a pinkish tinge over the landscape. The ocean spread out to the horizon on her left. The last time she'd been on the PCH and the 5 just for fun was…don't think about that now. Lifting the helmet's visor again, she took a deep breath of the salty sea air.

Alive. She wanted to relish in the feeling of being alive—free—before she returned to her prison.

They were passing through Camp Pendleton because she saw tanks on early-morning maneuvers to the west. How had they gotten this far north in such a short time? They must be flying like the wind. She loved it.

"Where are we headed?" she shouted into his ear, feeling loose strands of his hair whipping against her lips. She felt a zing to her clit. Crazy! She smiled and closed her eyes.

"Laguna Beach. A special place I want to show you."

A niggling memory flashed across her mind. Happy, yet sad. Savannah quashed the memory before it could invade her good mood. Leave the past in the past.

She felt like a schoolgirl cutting class, or what she'd imagined that would feel like. Having had private tutors at home, skipping classes was something she had never been able to do. She'd been caned more than once by her tutors for other infractions, though. Some days, she seemed to get in trouble for breathing. More likely, they were just pervs given permission by Master to discipline her.

Forget about that for now. Today, you're free, at least for a little while. Lowering the visor, she slid her arms around his waist, her thumbs brushing against his pecs. His muscles felt like leather-covered steel. She loved to touch him. The rumble of the Harley motor against her clit stimulated her much better than the butterfly vibrator her father used to force orgasms on her when he wanted to exact that torture on her.

Don't think about Him anymore.

All too soon, Damián pulled into a parking spot across the highway from the beach-access steps. She scooted back on the seat, ignoring the stinging pain in her bandaged thighs. She didn't want to think about that beating anymore. She only wanted to experience this, her last day.

Damián got off the bike first. She expected him to extend a hand to help her off. Instead, he motioned for her to swing her leg over the bike's seat, then bent down to remove her stilettos.

"We're ditching the heels," he said. He opened the storage case behind the seat, pulled out a beach towel, and stowed her shoes inside.

"I don't have any other shoes."

"I'll carry you." He removed her helmet—well, *his* helmet, since he only had the one—and secured it in the compartment with her shoes.

She laughed. "I can walk in my bare feet once we get to the beach."

His hands spanned her waist under the open jacket and he lifted her up as if she weighed nothing. She grabbed onto his shoulders to steady herself, laughing.

His muscles corded beneath his black T-shirt.

"I'll carry you again when we get to the rocks, then."

Rocks? She thought they were just going to stroll along the beach. Where did he plan to take her? Curiosity filled her thoughts as she alternated standing on one foot then the other. Seconds after her feet hit the pavement, the cuts she'd endured yesterday on her soles caused her to wince.

Damián handed her the towel, then lifted her into his arms. "Oh!" She screamed in surprise and laughed. Holding onto the towel, she wrapped her arms around his neck. Satin on steel. His attention was intent on watching for an opening in traffic for them to cross. She stared at his profile.

His nose had been broken at some point. Had he been an athlete in school, or had he been injured fighting? He had a closed-up hole for an ear piercing. No earring. A lock of hair fell over his forehead that she itched to brush back with her fingers. His devilish appearance did strange things to her libido—like ignite it. Strange, indeed.

She was grateful she didn't have to walk after all. It would take a while for her tender soles to heal. He started down the steps and she looked ahead to see where they were going.

A flash of memory caused a momentary bout of vertigo. She held on tighter and looked back up at him, almost expecting to see Maman. No. She was with Damián. She pushed the confusing image back into the recesses of her mind.

The steps went on forever. "My God! Are there really a thousand of them?" She couldn't even see the beach for the overgrown arbor hanging over portions of the stairway. Guilt assailed her for making him carry her. "You can put me down. I can walk."

"I'm carrying you."

His tone didn't invite disagreement, so she held on tight, hoping to ease some of her weight from his arms. Then she worried about putting a strain on his neck. But he didn't even sound out of breath, as though he bench-pressed a woman every day or something.

When he reached the sand and continued to carry her, she nipped lightly at his earlobe, and whispered, "Put me down, Damián." His arms tightened around her even more. Lord, she loved the feel of his arms under her thighs and around her back.

Why do I feel at home in the arms of this stranger?

This man who simply made her feel. Period. She'd been numb for so long. How had he gotten past her fortress at all, much less in such a short time? A first for her with any man.

After ten minutes or so, still not winded, he lowered her to the ground, letting her slide down his rock-hard body, allowing her to feel every contour of his chest and thighs. And a very erect penis. Savannah not only felt his erection, but her nipples tightened with the friction of his chest against hers. She'd never been aroused by a man, yet Damián had caused her clit to jolt and her panties to grow wet with little more than a look.

Good Lord, Savannah Gentry was full-blown horny.

Heady with her body's response, she pulled his head toward hers and nibbled at his lips, then sucked on his full lower lip. He groaned and grabbed the back of her head as he deepened the kiss. His tongue dove inside her, claiming her mouth as his. Rather than repulse her, Savannah felt her pelvis tilt toward him automatically. He lowered one of his hands to the small of her back and ground her even tighter against his erection.

When she thought her lungs would explode, she broke off the kiss, gasping for air, and laid her forehead in the crook of his neck. His pulse pounded as hard as hers.

When he spoke, he sounded as if he'd run a 25-yard dash. "*Madre de Dios.*"

Now he was winded. She smiled. What carrying her all that way hadn't managed, a kiss had.

Damián reached out to brush a strand of hair behind her ear. "Nice diversion, but we aren't there yet."

Well, she was closer to *there* than she'd ever been before. Then she understood his meaning and looked around. Huge moss-covered rocks dotted the beach leading to an opening in the cliff. A small tidal pool sat at the entrance, surrounded by jagged rocks pounded relentlessly by the foamy waves. To her left were high cliffs with expensive homes barely clinging to their ledges. She was amazed the people living in the homes hadn't claimed this beautiful spot as their own private sanctuary, rather than having it become a public-access beach. In Rancho, the residents would have put up a gate to keep out the riff-raff.

A flock of gulls dove at them, begging for handouts. She wished she had something to feed them. When their insistent squawking didn't yield the desired result, they flew down the nearly deserted beach hoping to find an easier mark.

Her feet were soothed by the cold, wet sand. She could probably walk once they got to the soft sand on the other side of the tidal pool. *How do you know there is soft sand on the other side?*

She squeaked when Damián bent down, pressed his shoulder against her stomach, then hoisted her over his massive shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "Hey, put me down!"

“I need to watch my footing or we’re both going to be sprawled on those rocks.”

The view of his tight ass being brushed by her loose hair sent her stomach into a tailspin. She giggled. She held onto the towel still, but didn’t know what to hold to steady herself. His ass seemed as good a place as any. She slid her free hand into the back pocket of his jeans.

“You’d better move your hands higher or I’m going to drop you here on the beach and have my way with you.”

She moved her hands against his lower back instead, holding onto the waistband of his jeans. His hand molded against her butt, holding her steady. Another zing let her know her body was very much aware of his.

She held on for dear life as he began walking. He navigated the rocks peppering the beach below with a sureness of foot, as though he’d been here many times. She looked down at the tidal pool and saw sea urchins clinging to the rocks.

Savannah’s heart skittered, then slammed against her chest like a jackhammer. So familiar. She’d come here many times, as well.

In her mind.

“You okay?” he asked, concern in his voice, as he stopped.

She realized her hands were gripping at his jeans harder than before. She managed to squeak out a “yes,” over the steady pounding of her heart. She didn’t need to see where they were headed. The jagged archway was the entrance to her cave. Her safe place beckoned them inside the cave. A brisk, cool breeze whipped her hair against her face. She hadn’t imagined the wind before when she’d escaped here. Or the strong arms holding her against a hard body.

When he reached the center of the cave, he lowered her to her feet. He looked down at her expectantly, as if proud to show off his special place. Tears spilled from her eyes. Her private cave. She’d never shared it with anyone except Maman.

Until now.

She almost felt that if she turned around, Maman would be waiting for her, a picnic lunch spread on a blanket. Savannah couldn’t bring herself to look.

Maman had left her. She didn’t even say goodbye. Savannah still loved her. She just wished Maman had taken her with her, rather than leaving her behind.

Damián’s gentle, but firm hand cupped her chin and pulled her gaze upward as he tilted her head back. His brow furrowed and he cocked his head. Concern clouded his eyes. The only man who’d ever cared about her, taken care of her, now wanted to show her *his* special place.

She wanted nothing more than to please him in return, even if there never could be a relationship between them. Tears spilled down her face, bitten by the cool breeze. They could only have this day. This moment in time.

Because someone else owned her body.

Until tonight, when, at last, the slave screwed the Master.

*

Damián brushed the wetness away from her cheeks. Tears? Why? “What’s the matter, *querida*?”

She shook her head and more tears spilled from the outer corners of her eyes. “Just kiss me,” she whispered.

He had no idea what had happened to the mood from when she’d been giggling on the beach. But the hard-on he’d been fighting against since he’d held her last night demanded he worry about all that stuff later. Right now, he held the most perfect woman in the world in his arms. She wanted to be kissed. By him. Before she vanished into thin air, he would give the lady what she wanted.

His head lowered to hers, capturing her lips. So sweet—better than honey on sopapillas. He drew her lower lip between his teeth and into his mouth, sucking gently. When she moaned and pressed her pelvis against his, he decided he wouldn’t be able to slow this down. He needed to be inside her. Now.

Mierda. How would he ever last long enough to make it good for her?

His tongue entered her softness, then he sucked her sweet tongue into his mouth. He held her lower back with one hand, pressing her body against his hard-on. With his other hand, he brushed his fingers down her arm, then reached between their bodies to cup her tit. So full. Firm. Her nipple was rock-hard even before he squeezed it. Her hips jolted toward his.

Damn. He needed to feel her naked skin against his. To see her beautiful body in this setting, erasing the image of the grotesque position he’d found her in yesterday. He wanted to see her hot and writhing beneath him, waiting for him to please her.

Stepping back, he took the towel from her and spread it open on the wet sand to protect as much of her skin as he could. Then he unzipped his leather jacket with shaking hands and slid it down her arms. Rolling it into a pillow for her head, he placed it near one end of the towel.

He reached down with both arms and pulled the hem of her dress up. She lifted his arms to aid him in removing her dress. His dick pressed painfully against his zipper. Precum wet his jeans.

Jesús. Please let me last long enough to make it good for her.

He reached between her breasts to unhook her black lace bra. Her breasts spilled out and he cupped them. She had bruises from the ropes last night. He

hoped he wasn't hurting her. His brown skin against her pale breasts caused his dick to strain even more. Then she skimmed her panties down her legs, careful not to pull at the bandages on her thighs. He throbbed when he saw her natural golden triangle of soft curls.

Mierda. The only thought remaining in his brain was how much he needed to bury himself inside her. But he froze, unable to keep from staring at her body. Despite the reminders of last night's torture, she was perfection. Her nipples became swollen, begging for attention. He bent down to draw one hard peak inside his mouth, flicking his tongue against it, causing her nipple to swell even more. She hissed air between her teeth, grabbing him by the sides of his head, causing his dick to throb even harder. His hand cupped the neglected other peak and he rolled it between his fingers. Hard. She gasped, tilting her golden triangle against his zippered fly. His dick pulsated even more.

Madre de Dios, he couldn't wait much longer. Maybe if he kept his jeans on, he'd be able to stretch this moment out. Pressing her down onto the towel and his jacket, he kissed her lips again, his hand skimming lightly along her abdomen as he sought the downy curls between her thighs. His finger stroked between her outer lips and she opened her legs for him. Wet. Her pussy was so fucking wet.

Pulling away, he looked down at her.

"I'm sorry. I can't wait. I need to be inside you."

She smiled and nodded, reaching down to grab his dick through the denim.

He pulled away. "If you touch me like that, I'm not going to last until I get inside you." He quirked the corner of his mouth and shrugged. She released him and smiled.

"Open for me, *querida*."

When she spread her wings wide for him, like the beautiful *mariposa* she was, he felt pride surge in his chest. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. How had something so delicate, so perfect, flitted into his life?

Knowing this moment would be fleeting, in more ways than one, he decided to create enough memories to last a lifetime. He changed his next course of action.

*

Savannah's clit throbbed. *Please, touch me again*. She'd never asked a man for what she wanted and couldn't start now. She should have helped him take off his jeans, but had been so lost in the sensations of his hands and mouth on her body, all functional thoughts had left her brain.

Expecting him to take them off himself now, she was taken aback when his head bent toward her pussy. She tried to close her legs, then gasped at the

friction of the bandages against her raw skin.

He leaned back and looked up at her. “Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head. It wasn’t his fault. Still, he mustn’t look at her there. She felt heat rise in her face. Shame. But he continued to hold her legs open wide. Waiting.

“Please, let me taste you.”

Savannah felt her face grow hotter. He was begging? How could she deny him? No one had ever asked before. It was dark in here. He wouldn’t be able to see. She nodded her head and watched as he smiled, then lowered himself to her again. When his tongue flitted against her swollen clit, all thought receded. Her pelvis surged toward his mouth.

“Ohh!”

Empowered, he took his finger and wet it against the opening of her vagina, then plunged inside her in one strong stroke. “Yes, Damián! Oh, Lord, yes!” The combination of his tongue and finger were delicious. Then another finger joined the first and he moved them in a “come here” motion that was her undoing. An odd pressure built inside her making her feel she could fly. She bucked against his hand and mouth, simulating intercourse. No, more like lovemaking. There was a difference, she was discovering.

She couldn’t hold back. When would he enter her? Then his lips were gone and she felt his eyes on her as his fingers began to plunge in and out of her. “Explode for me, *bebé*. Don’t hold anything back.”

His tongue returned to draw gentle circles against her clit and she came undone. Her screams of ecstasy crashed against the walls of the cave as wave after wave of pleasure rolled over her. She held his head to her, pulling fists full of his hair free of his queue, not wanting the moment to end for anything. But it did. Tears spilled from her eyes. The intense beauty of the orgasm left her feeling fragile. Wanting more.

Feeling lost.

Then Damián stood and removed his jeans. She watched his penis spring loose, large and erect. Oh, Lord. He’d never fit inside her.

Propping himself on his elbows, he pressed his body down against her chest. Smothered. She couldn’t breathe. “No!” She pushed him off her chest, gasping to fill her lungs.

Breathe, Savi. He doesn’t want to hurt you.

She opened her eyes. Damián looked down at her and brushed her hair away from her face. “What’s wrong, *querida*?”

Oh, God. She didn’t want him to stop. And she didn’t want to explain why she couldn’t have him on top of her. “I need to see your face when you make

love with me."

He smiled and propped himself up on his hands. Lord, he was so beautiful. He pressed his erection against her sensitive clit. She pulled his face toward hers and met him halfway, kissing his full, wet mouth. Unlike their kiss on the beach, this time she tasted herself on his lips. How strange. He plunged his tongue into her mouth and she felt his penis throbbing against her clit, which responded in kind. Her nipples tightened and budded.

He pulled back, propping himself on one hand. The veins in his arms bulged as he took his penis and rubbed it up and down against her wet pussy lips. Each time he touched her clit, she surged upward.

"Oh, *bebé*. You're so fucking sexy."

The sweet sentimental endearment, coupled with such a crude word, sent her libido into overdrive. She reached down and guided him to the opening of her vagina. "Please. Don't make me wait any longer."

"Oh, shit." He started to pull back. "I don't have protection."

Savannah smiled that he would be concerned, but she knew there wouldn't be time for a baby to grow inside her. The thought of continuing life as she'd known it when Damián took her home tonight was even more unfathomable than yesterday when she'd made her decision to end her life. She only had today and she wanted to experience being made love to more than any other dying wish.

So she lied to him. "I'm on the pill."

His eyes grew smoky as he balanced himself on both hands and rammed his penis inside her to the hilt. She grunted, feeling as if she'd been split apart.

"I'm sorry. You're so fucking tight." He lay still, waiting for her to adjust to his size. His breathing was shallow and rapid, as was hers. She felt him throbbing inside her and tilted her pelvis, taking him deeper. "That's right, *bebé*. Fuck me."

She wrapped her legs around his back, letting her feet rest against his buttocks as she let him deeper inside. He pulled almost completely out of her, then she drove him home inside her again. Tilting her pelvis, she matched him stroke for stroke. She'd never felt so full, as if the tip of his rod touched her cervix. She reached up and placed her hands on his upper arms, feeling the strength and sinew in his muscles as his strokes grew faster. Harder. Each upward thrust of his penis jolted against her clit. Even though the friction wasn't enough for her to come, she didn't care.

Savannah just wanted to feel Damián possessing her, to feel him claiming her body. She'd never willingly given her body to any man. She felt empowered for the first time in her life. She'd chosen to be with him.

Then he reached his hand between their bodies, his finger and thumb stroking her wetness. When he placed his thumb on the hood of her clitoris and used his thumb and finger to massage her, she screamed. “Ohhhh, God!” She closed her eyes. His thumb grazed her clit as he pounded into her vagina. Savannah felt an explosion building inside her, unlike anything she’d experienced before. She held on, her fingernails digging into his muscles. She panted, unable to catch a deep breath. Dizzy with the sensations roiling through her body, she groaned. So close. She’d never felt such euphoria.

“Come for me again, *bebé*.”

At his command, her world flew apart. She screamed as he covered her mouth with his own, capturing her cries of ecstasy and taking them into his body. Her hips bucked against his of their own volition.

“I can’t hold back any longer, *bebé*.”

“Please don’t! Come inside me!”

With a groan, he lowered himself to his forearms and pumped harder. The pressure on her chest caused a moment of panic. Sweat broke out on her forehead. *Breathe, Savi. Just breathe.* Rather than closing his eyes, he stared intently at her. She couldn’t look away from his gaze either. The panic eased a bit. Not completely gone, but manageable. She’d never connected on such a personal level with another human being.

He groaned and she felt the crest of another orgasm rising up inside her. Good Lord! Again? So soon? The muscles of her vagina pulsated around him, milking him dry. She closed her eyes and threw her head back in abandon. Her screams of release coincided with his earthy curse as he exploded inside her.

Her body convulsed around him as the aftershocks wracked her body. As she floated back to earth, she felt his forehead pressed to her breast as he gasped for air. She needed to get him off her chest. Smothering.

She threaded her fingers through his hair and grasped the sides of his head to pull him away until their gazes met. He looked disconnected. Lost. *Oh, no!* Hadn’t it been good for him? She’d become so used to just letting men do as they pleased with her body—an object, nothing but a receptacle—that she didn’t have the first clue how to give back. She’d never been emotionally engaged in the sex act before.

Tears burned against the backs of her eyes. Why couldn’t she quit crying? She hadn’t given in to tears for such a long time. Now she was crying all the time.

She looked at Damián as he gasped for air. He’d done all the work. Was there something she was supposed to do now? Had she failed him?

“Fucking unbelievable.” He smiled.

Oh, Lord. He liked it! A laugh of relief bubbled up inside her. His earthy language turned her on. He could talk dirty to her all day long.

"You can say that again."

"I'd rather do it again."

She realized he was still hard inside her. Worried again, she asked, "Didn't you come?"

"Oh, yeah, *bebé*. But let's do it again before my dick gets the message."

Good Lord! Her prior experience had been with her father, who took hours to be ready to go at it again. Thank God. She'd never had sex with anyone close to her own age before.

Most days, she felt more like ninety herself. Still, she'd had three orgasms in a matter of a few minutes. With a stranger, no less. And why didn't she care? Today, she just wanted to feel young, carefree—and alive.

Damián had given her the most beautiful experience of her life. But he only made her want more. She didn't want this day to ever end. She pulled his mouth toward her and just before they made contact, she whispered, "Fuck me."

*

An hour later, Damián collapsed onto his back on the wet sand. *Mierda*, he couldn't get enough of this woman. Her screams reverberated around the walls of his mind from her last orgasm. How many was that for her now? Six? Seven? *Madre de Dios*.

When he thought he could string two coherent words together again, he raised himself onto his side and propped his head into his cupped hand. He just stared down at her, his hand playing with the strands of her hair curled around one of her tits.

She smiled up at him, but he saw sadness in her expression. Regrets already?

"What are you thinking, *querida*?" he asked.

"I wish we could stay here forever."

Ah, now that kind of regret he could live with. He bent down and kissed her, gently this time. So sweet. Pure torture. He wasn't sure he'd be able to make love again and didn't care. He just wanted to feel her lips, her body, against his. As if ruled by a mind of its own, his hand reached out to cup her firm breast. He couldn't keep his hands or lips off her.

But he knew they couldn't stay here forever. He wondered what she was going to do now. He hoped she wouldn't return to being a paid escort. She deserved a better life than that.

Raising his head again to look at her, he asked, "If you could have any job you wanted, what would it be?"

He watched her teeth trap the corner of her bottom lip between them and she puckered her brow as she thought about the question. Then she smiled and shrugged, as if it were a pipe dream. “A social worker. I’d like to work with abused kids.”

Wow. What would someone like her know about abused kids? Well, she certainly was an abused adult. Something like that would require a lot of education. Not that she couldn’t afford it.

“So, what’s keeping you from pursuing your dream?”

She looked away. “It’s too late.”

How could it be too late? She wasn’t any older than he was. She had to have the time. Look what she was doing now. And money? Hell, she lived in Rancho, after all. Still, if she was so wealthy, why was she selling her body? Maybe she was one of the hired help, rather than an owner. Did she have a sugar daddy keeping her? Was it Jerk-off from the hotel? But, if that were the case, then why didn’t she have money?

She puzzled him.

If money was the issue, he wished he could help her pay for college. But he could barely support himself. And now that he’d been fired….

“Can’t your family help?”

“No.” She turned toward him and brushed a lock of hair off his forehead. “Don’t ask. It’s complicated.”

But why wouldn’t her family help her make a better life? Damián had come from a supportive, loving family. They didn’t have two nickels to rub together, but Mama had made sure they had food in their bellies, even if they had to eat tamales twice a day. Mama and Papa had both worked themselves into early graves, making money for the rich bastards in Rancho.

He decided to let it go.

Damián wondered if he’d ever see her again. Doubtful. They were worlds apart. But their bodies sure spoke the same language. Was there any chance they could date?

Yeah, right.

But he still had her with him now. Pulling Savannah into the curve of his body, he held her. She molded herself against him. Soon, he felt her breathing slow down and become more steady. She’d been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours. Her body needed sleep. He hadn’t gotten much sleep either, but was too wired to give in.

He’d have to get her back home soon. But what awaited her there? Did she even want to go back? She seemed in no hurry, that’s for sure.

Then what? He lifted a lock of hair from her bare shoulder, rubbing its silk between his thumb and forefinger. He'd never dated a blonde before. And he wouldn't be dating this one either. Too different.

Just a few more hours and she'd be out of his life. His head grew heavy and he laid it down on the towel, pressing his forehead against the side of her head. So right. Would he ever hold something so perfect again? He wished….

Fuck! Damián jerked up. He'd fallen asleep. He looked outside the opening of the cave and saw the sun making its descent to the horizon. It would be dark within an hour. He needed to get her home.

Savannah stirred next to him, then looked up with sleep-filled eyes and smiled. His dick hardened. Damn. He couldn't get enough of her. She reached up and placed her hand at the back of his head and pulled him toward her.

His lips met hers and tenderness soon turned to flames. She opened to him and he reached for her breast, kneading her soft flesh. What he really wanted was to sink himself inside her again.

Half an hour later, both of them breathing hard and sated, Damián sighed. He stood and reached down to pull her to her feet. She winced again and he remembered how bruised and sore she was after the beating. He hated the thought of anyone hurting her like that again. She reached out and brushed sand off his side.

He turned his finger in a circular motion. "Turn around."

She did so and he brushed the sand off her, as well. Luckily, there wasn't much there. "I think the water might be a little too cold for us to wash more of this off."

"I'm fine."

"The ride back might be a little uncomfortable." He worried about her legs, but at least the welts were still covered with the bandages.

"I said I'm fine." Her voice had taken on an edge.

Damián shrugged. Fine then. He picked up her underwear and dress, shook them out, and handed them to her. "Come on. Get dressed. We have to go before the tide comes in."

He couldn't help but notice the disappointment in her eyes. She didn't seem any more anxious to end their time together than he did. No sense prolonging the inevitable, though. They dressed in silence, then he reached for her hand and she tucked it inside his. As he led her toward the entrance, he thought how right her hand felt in his.

Framed by the opening of the cave, the sun touched the top of the ocean on the horizon.

“Wait,” she whispered. He looked down at her and saw her skin softened to a pale pink by the glowing sun. Her face was filled with wonder, as if she’d never seen a more beautiful sunset. Well, neither had he. Watching it on her face.

When the glowing globe was but a memory, he turned her toward him. Tears again? Savannah broke his heart. He brushed the tears away with his thumbs, then cupped her face and lowered his mouth to meet hers. Feeling the quiver in her lips sent his dick throbbing again.

He kissed her sweetly, knowing they couldn’t stay. The tide would begin to roll in soon. When he pulled away, she smiled up at him. “Thank you for showing me your special place Damián.”

Uncomfortable, he grinned. “I have a new special place now. Wherever you are.”

She smiled back, a bittersweet smile. Somehow Damián knew this was goodbye. He lowered his lips to hers, needing one more taste of her before he took her back to her safe gated world.

Then he lifted her and carried her across the rocks to the beach. When he got to the steps, she protested his continuing to carry her, but she didn’t realize how often he had used these steps as his own personal gym. He could have carried her up and down them all day, especially the way he felt after their lovemaking.

“We should stop and get something to eat.” Some date he was! Hadn’t even thought about food all day.

“I’m fine.”

“Well, I’m not.” She was way too thin anyway.

Soon they sat over platters of enchiladas, rice, and beans. Savannah remained silent and barely made a dent in the food. She’d already begun to pull away from him. But he couldn’t take her back to a life as an escort, especially one who had so little regard for her own safety.

“You going to be okay at home?”

She looked up from her plate and smiled. The smile didn’t reach her eyes. “I’ll be fine.”

Why did he doubt that?

“That Jerk-off from the hotel doesn’t live with you, does he?”

She glanced back down at her plate. “No. He’s just a…business partner.”

“You need a new partner.”

A tear slid down her cheek and onto the table. *Mierda*. He’d made her cry again. He reached out and squeezed the hand holding her fork. “I’m sorry. Just tell me that you’re going to be okay when I drop you off.”

She nodded, but didn’t make eye contact.

“Convince me or I won’t take you home.”

Her head came up again. A mixture of fear and excitement flickered in her expressive eyes. “I have to go back. But everything’s going to be fine. Things have…changed.”

Things sure had changed for him, but he didn’t understand what she meant. Then she smiled, pulled her hand out of his grasp, and took a forkful of her Spanish rice and ate it.

They left the restaurant in Laguna nearly an hour later, when he’d given up on her eating any more. He’d prolonged their time together to its limit. Time to take her home.

Darkness engulfed the 5 as they headed south. He’d put his jacket on her again to keep her from getting cold. When they passed the San Onofre power plant, with its pair of red glowing nipples, he couldn’t help but thinking about her breasts pressing against his back, or taking each of her nips in his mouth once more. His still erect dick throbbed.

Not this time, chico.

Once in Rancho, she gave him directions to her particular gate. Taking the remote from her purse, she opened the wrought-iron entrance to her fortress. As the gates opened slowly, he never felt more out of his element.. He half expected St. Peter to be waiting on the other side telling him he needed to park his ass right where it was or, better yet, turn around and head back the other way where he belonged.

She started to take the helmet off. “I can walk from here.”

“Like hell you will.” He rolled on the throttle and enjoyed the feel of her hands grabbing him around his waist again as he ascended the winding driveway.

He pulled up in front of the mansion, illuminated by a series of spotlights showing off the monstrosity at the top of the hill—although Damián had no idea who could see it with all the trees.

Isolated. She must have incredible views of the ocean on the back side of the house. He wondered why the sunset at Laguna had captured her with such awe.

“Please, Damián! I don’t want you to…”

Damián felt her hands tighten around his waist as they saw lights going on from room to room as someone made his or her way to the front door. He had barely stopped the Harley and put the stick down before she let go and scrambled off the bike. She hurriedly unhooked the helmet and handed it to him.

“Thanks for everything, Damián. This will be the best day of my whole life.” She pecked him on the cheek and made a dash for the front door, as if she hoped to get inside before anyone saw him. Did he embarrass her?

Mierda, he wouldn’t have guessed that she was like that.

What did she mean by “will be” the best day? She had her whole life ahead of her. How could she know that?

Before she reached the door, it opened inward. Rather than the man from the hotel, a tall, older man stepped onto the fan-shaped flagstone entrance. She lowered her head when he put his hand on her shoulder to halt her. Was this her father?

The placement of the man’s hand seemed more familiar than a father would touch his daughter. Her sugar daddy, then? Man, won’t he be pissed to learn she’d let someone else dip his wick in her. His crude thought soured his stomach, but if she could just throw away what they’d experienced, then so could he.

“Go in the house, Savannah. Wait in the office.”

“Yes, sir.”

The man reminded him of the Doms in his ex-girlfriend’s porn videos. Was he her Dom? Did she really get off on that pain shit? Then why was he pimping her out to other men? To Jerk-off? Those other men?

He saw her body tense as she cast a glance at Damián. Tears shone in her eyes. Did he see a bit of fear, as well? His gut clenched. Goddamn it, why did she put up with that crap? Clearly, she’d found sexual satisfaction with him at the beach, and he’d done nothing to hurt her. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her. Take her away from here. Cherish and protect her.

She turned her body toward Damián, lifting her head just enough to make eye contact, and mouthed another *thank you*, then veered away to enter the house. Damián watched until he could no longer see her, then turned his attention back to the old man. If the asshole could breathe fire, he’d singe the tires off the Harley. His face was splotchy red, hands clenched at his sides.

“If I ever catch you near Savannah again, Orlando, I’ll make you sorry you were ever born.”

How’d he know his name?

Well, fuck you, old man. “If she wants to see me, that’s her decision.”

“Savannah makes no decisions. And I’ve done some investigating. If you don’t want to be charged with assault and battery for that incident at my hotel yesterday, you’ll heed my words.”

What the fuck? He owned the hotel where Damián had worked? Did Savannah work for him, too? He guessed so. Why? Hell, he realized he didn’t understand anything about her. She was the most screwed up *chica* he’d ever met. If she was willing to sell her body so she could live like this, he’d never have anything to offer her.

“Get that contraption off my drive before it leaks any more oil.”

His Harley did not leak anything. Pissed, but not wanting to risk an arrest and doing jail time, Damián revved the motor, glanced at the open door Savannah had disappeared through, then peeled away. He turned back to see the black streak of rubber very visible in the overly lit tiled driveway. He gained a sense of satisfaction knowing that, every time her sugar daddy saw that patch of rubber, he'd remember Damián. His spirits lifted a little.

But the haunted look in Savannah's eyes as she mouthed her thanks would be what burned in his memory forever. Had he made the right decision to leave her here? *Mierda*. He should have given her his phone number, in case she needed him. Not that he would have expected her to use it.

Madre de Dios, he hoped she'd take better care of herself.

Damián would just have to hold onto his memories of what had been the most perfect day of his life, with the most perfect woman.

*

Savannah sank to the floor, laying her flushed face against the cool tiles. Her stomach still threatened to revolt, but she knew there would just be more of the dry heaves she'd experienced for the last fifteen minutes.

What she'd worried about for the past month seemed a certainty now. Two missed periods. Morning sickness.

She was pregnant. Her hand moved lower, from her stomach to the area over her womb. A baby. Tears prickled her eyes, then dripped onto the floor. She had to protect this baby. Who would help her?

Oh, Lord, what was she going to do?

Damián. I need you so much.

She only knew Damián by his first name. She'd tried to get an address or phone number from the hotel's business manager, but the woman wouldn't give out confidential employee information. On former employees either.

Her father had beaten her so severely the night Damián had brought her back from their special day at the beach cave over two months ago. If only the torture had ended there. By the time her Master and Lyle had ended the beating, probably because their arms were tired, her father had had to carry her to her room.

She'd been afraid he was going to rape her again for the first time in a long time. Then he'd told her he wouldn't want to catch a disease from *that Spic*. Savannah shuddered. Her father and Lyle were the only diseases in her life.

Too sore to move for the next couple days, she hadn't carried out her plan to end her life. Then, when she had been able to get out of bed, the possibility of seeing Damián again someday kept her from going through with it.

Not a day went by since Damián had brought her back here that she didn't regret letting him leave without her. But Damián couldn't have known. She hadn't told him what her life here was like. Why hadn't she been brave enough to trust him?

Because of her shame. Thank God he hadn't noticed the brand in the dark cave. She'd never want anyone to see that.

But something had changed that day. No, not just something. Everything. She'd begun to live again. To experience life. Damián had roused long-buried feelings inside her. She'd been numb for so long. Opening herself up to the experience of being treated with respect and cherished by a man, if only for a short time, had made her feel worth something more than a body to be used for sex.

As she had guessed, allowing herself to feel had only succeeded in making her punishment even more intense. However, now she had a new safe place to escape to during the beatings. In Damián's arms at the beach cave. She knew the cave wasn't just her imagination now, but a real place, where she could hear the waves crashing on the shore, see the dusky light of sunset, and feel his arms around her.

Magical.

No, safe.

She stroked the skin over her bare abdomen. And now she needed to protect what had resulted from that beautiful day. Sitting up, she pulled herself to her feet by holding onto the rim of the pedestal sink when her weakened legs threatened to give way. In the mirror, she saw that red splotches dotted her cheeks and neck from the strain of the dry heaves. She took a washcloth and wet it with cold water. Holding the cool cloth to her face, she closed her eyes and the image of Damián's face gave her comfort.

She would leave. Today. But where would she go?

Maman. I can't do this alone.

A distant memory flitted across her mind. The Christmas before she'd left, Maman had taken her down to Solana Beach to attend midnight Mass in the Eden Gardens neighborhood. Maman spoke both French and Spanish and loved to hear the Christmas Mass said in one of those languages. Savannah had only been seven then, but remembered it now as if it were yesterday. Maman told her the sermon had been about the Blessed Baby and the importance for members of the community to help young women who were in trouble to find safety and shelter to have their babies. At the time, Savannah hadn't known why having a baby would cause a girl to be in trouble.

And suddenly the answer for herself seemed so clear. Of course! She'd go to the Catholic church in Eden Gardens. They would help a young girl they perceived to be "in trouble," even though this baby actually was the impetus Savannah needed to get herself out of trouble. And her father would never look for her in a barrio neighborhood like that. She'd take on a new name—perhaps the English version of her Mama's maiden name Pannier. Savi Baker. He'd never trace her.

If the people of the Hispanic community were anything like Damián, she'd be okay. Perhaps she could tutor kids or somehow be of help to them while she waited for the baby.

Oh, Damián. I'm so scared. I wish I had your courage and strength.

Section Three

Prequel to Marc's Story, *Nobody's Angel*

October 2003, Aspen, Colorado

"Not tonight, damn it." The knock at his door was not welcome. Marc D'Alesso had had an exhausting day trying to juggle what seemed like dozens of crises at the resort and just wanted to be left alone.

He drained his glass of Pinot Bianco and leaned over to set his wineglass on the oak coffee table. Standing, he walked over to the stereo to turn down Bocelli's *Por Amor*. The living room of his Aspen apartment was done entirely in earth tones that reminded him of his childhood home in Lombardy, and usually provided some calm for him after the stresses of trying to run the family business.

So not working tonight.

With reluctance, he crossed the living room to open the front door. On the welcome mat knelt a voluptuous Italian woman he recognized immediately, even though her head was bowed.

Ah, shit. Not again.

"I've been very bad, Master Marco."

Melissa raised her head to look at him and smiled. She wore a very low-cut blouse, her breasts spilling from the gaping vee. Two years ago, he'd have dragged her inside, stripped her, and had her ass reddened within ten minutes.

That was before he'd found her in bed with his brother, Gino.

"Look Melissa, I'm tired, I don't appreciate your topping from the bottom, and I thought we were finished playing these games."

She sat back on her heels, straightening her back. A look of sheer desperation crossed her face before she controlled it and reached up to place her hands on the sides of his hips. He didn't help her stand, but perhaps if he had, she wouldn't have been able to rub her breasts across his crotch and chest as she pulled herself to her feet.

Melissa teetered and grabbed his arms for support. Had she been drinking? Not nearly as much as he'd have to drink to want to have anything more to do with her again.

The woman who had nearly become his fiancée wrapped her arms behind his neck and pulled his face toward hers. “Please, Marco. I need you. No one can satisfy me the way you can.”

He doubted she’d waited around celibately over the last eighteen months for him to *satisfy* her again. What the hell did she want? He reached up to separate her interlocked hands and took a step away from her. Big mistake. She stepped into the apartment to follow him.

“Melissa, we’re through. We were through six months before what happened after Gino’s funeral. That was just a big mistake.”

Tears filled her brown eyes. She’d always been able to cry at a moment’s notice. Her well-manicured hand splayed across his chest. “Marco, we need each other. Gino would have wanted us to be together to comfort each other.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Gino didn’t share. What was his, was his. And he’d made it abundantly clear that she was his before he left for Afghanistan. Of course, after their betrayal, Marc had wanted nothing to do with either of them.

She closed her eyes, then gazed up at him again and took a new tack. “Gino never satisfied me the way you could. He didn’t understand my need to be controlled.”

As if Marc had ever been in control in their relationship. She’d pursued him in college and they’d dated exclusively the year before he graduated. Then he brought her home to the resort to meet his family in preparation of popping the question. At least he’d been divested of that notion before it was too late.

Melissa had played Marc for a fool. He’d vowed that no woman would have that kind of control over him ever again.

“Look, I’m going to drive you home. You’ve obviously been drinking. Someone can bring you back over tomorrow to get your car.”

He turned to walk into the kitchen to retrieve his Porsche keys. Melissa pressed her body against his back, pushing him against the dark-gray granite countertop. Her hand snaked out to grab his cock through his pants. She couldn’t suppress a moan, apparently disappointed to find she hadn’t given him an erection despite her blatant attempts.

“Marco, please. It’s always been so good between us.” She stroked him and he felt his long-neglected cock responding.

He spun around and grabbed her shoulders, wanting to push her away. Her pupils dilated. Damn her. If she wanted to be controlled, he could accommodate her.

He wrapped his fingers around her upper arm and guided her back into the living room. She stumbled on the stilettos and he steadied her. Maybe it wasn’t that she was drunk, just that she couldn’t walk on those damned five-inch heels.

When they reached the tan-colored leather sofa, he pushed her hips against the armrest and eased her torso over until her head was on the seat cushion and her ass high in the air. She turned her head and looked back at him, smiling.

“Hard, Sir. Give it to me hard.”

Marc knew he’d hate himself later for letting her top him like this, but right now, he needed to blow off some steam. His life was so damned fucked up. He hated his job, but knew he couldn’t leave it. He owed the family that much. But being cooped up behind a desk all day was killing him. He hadn’t been out on the slopes since Gino enlisted.

Managing the resort was killing him by degrees.

He went to the bedroom to grab his toy bag and returned to Melissa, who waited patiently for him to begin. God help him, if she didn’t look good to him, draped over the armrest, waiting to be spanked. Well, he wasn’t in the mood for an over-the-knee spanking tonight. Too intimate. He reached into the bag and pulled out his riding crop.

When she saw it, he saw her butt cheeks clench. Her mouth fell open as she sucked air into her lungs.

“What’s your safe word, Melissa?”

“Cherry, Master Marco.”

“Use it if you need it.”

Whack.

The flat leather tip came down on her right cheek and she gasped. He watched as the red mark appeared on her olive-colored skin.

Whack.

Again on the left cheek. Normally, he would have rubbed her ass cheeks before beginning a spanking. He would have planned the scene and gotten his head in the zone, but his thoughts were a jumbled mess tonight. Not that Melissa would notice or care.

He delivered four more whacks in quick succession, alternating cheeks.

“Oh, God, yes!” She moaned.

Damn her for liking it, too. “Quiet!” The next blows fell to her upper thighs. One leg kicked out at him, nearly hitting him in the groin.

“Keep your legs down!”

She put her feet back on the floor. “Sorry, Sir.”

The next eight blows reddened her ass nicely. *Dio*, he didn’t like taking his pleasure when angry, but his cock throbbed at the sight. He needed to find release. He’d given her plenty of warning, if she wasn’t looking for sex tonight, but Melissa had never run cold on him before and he didn’t think she would this

time. He reached into the bag and pulled out a condom package. Placing the riding crop on top of his bag, he tore open the foil packet.

“Yes, Master. Give me that big cock.”

“I didn’t give you permission to speak.” He ground the words out between his teeth as he sheathed himself. He most definitely didn’t give her permission to speak in porn-flick script lines either. Standing behind her, he reached down to stroke his fingers between her folds. Wet. He spread the moisture to encircle her clit, which protruded from its hood. Her ass bucked and tilted toward him. “Mmm.” He rammed two fingers inside her and she moaned, but didn’t speak.

Unable to wait any longer, he positioned himself behind her, held her ample hips with his hands, and thrust himself inside.

“Oh my God, Master!”

Ignoring her, he battered against her, his balls slapping against her pussy. He nearly pulled out of her, then pushed her legs open wider and slammed into her again.

“Sweet, Jesus! I need to come so badly, Marco!”

“Silence! You do not have permission to come yet.” He continued to pound her pussy, then reached down and took her clit between his thumb and forefinger. He squeezed hard. She bucked against him. “Oh, God! Oh, God! Please, Marco!”

“How do you address me?”

“Master Marco, please. I can’t wait any longer!”

“But you will.”

“Ohhh! Oh, yes!” As little as she could move with him confining her, she still managed to tilt her hips toward him, allowing him deeper access. “Fuck me, Master! Fuck me harder!”

He thrust until he felt his own explosion nearing. He purposely pictured her in bed with Gino to delay his own orgasm. “Come, now!” As she went over the top, he felt her vagina clenching his cock. He needed to hold out a little longer. He wasn’t finished with her yet.

“Oh, God! Ohhh, Marco, yesssss! Don’t stop!”

He leaned over her, continuing to stroke her clit even after her spasms had ended. She tried to move her pelvis to evade his fingers on her oversensitive clit.

“Come again.”

“No, Marco. I can’t.”

“Twice you have addressed me as Marco without using my proper title. You owe me two more orgasms.” They’d negotiated orgasm torture before, but broke up before they’d tried it. “I. Said. Come. Again.” He ground the words out

against her ear. With her body restrained under his, he stroked her clit harder, faster. She couldn't escape the pressure he applied. She was trapped.

Just as he was.

Trapped.

"Oh, my God! I'm coming! Oh, shit!" She bucked wildly against him, clenching his cock as another orgasm wracked her body, this one seeming to be more intense than the last. He'd been taught never to promise a sub something and not deliver, but delaying his own orgasm was hell.

He let her breathing slow a bit, then touched her clit again.

"Oh, God, don't! Please, Mar…Master. Enough!"

His fingers stilled. "Do you wish to say your safe word?"

She paused, gasping for breath, then shook her head. He pulled her hair away from her face so he could judge whether she could take another one. He began stroking her clit again. Her cheeks were wet from tears, but her mouth panted as she let the sensations build again. Her mewling sounds told him she wasn't in pain. Not that pain was necessarily a bad thing in Melissa's book of needs.

He stroked her harder. Her screams became incoherent as she bucked against him.

"Open your eyes."

She did as he ordered. He pinched her clit again, then stood up and rammed her with his cock.

"Oh, shit! Oh, Master, please! No more!"

Again and again, he thrust himself inside her, demanding more than he ever had before. He took perverse pleasure in making something so desired feel like a punishment. Not unlike his feeling of being trapped at this resort, staring at the mountains every day and knowing he couldn't walk away from that god-damned desk and enjoy them as he had before Gino had joined the Marines.

He reached down and stroked her clit again as he neared his own climax.

"Oh, ohhh, ohhhhhh, yes! Yes, please! Don't stop!" Her body convulsed beneath him as she experience her third orgasm in just a few minutes.

Marc found himself breathing hard, as well. He pumped harder, faster. The release he felt as his semen spurted from him caused his legs to go weak. But he continued to pound her pussy until the last spasm of his cock and her vagina ceased. He pulled out immediately and staggered on weakened legs to the bathroom where he disposed of the condom, washed himself off, then got a clean washcloth and wet it with warm water for her.

He looked into the mirror over the vanity. The disgust he saw written on his face brought him to a standstill. Surprisingly, he wasn't disgusted with Melissa, but with himself.

What the fuck was he doing?

He needed to get away—from Melissa, from the resort, from his family.

Far enough away to find himself.

Before this place totally consumed his soul.

*

Christmas Day 2003, Aspen, Colorado

"You've what?" Mama turned red. All conversation at the dinner table came to an abrupt halt, quite a feat at a large Italian family gathering. Marc felt the scrutiny of every set of eyes at the table, but most especially Mama's. And Melissa's.

"I've joined the Navy." Marc repeated.

"How could you do such a thing?" Mama's voice rose an octave. "Hasn't this family given enough already?"

Marc met his mother's gaze. "Exactly why I need to do this."

In part, at least. If Marc could play some part in the victory over Al Qaeda and the Taliban, Gino would not have died in vain. He'd even passed the test to train as a hospital corpsman. Maybe he could help keep someone else from dying, so he or she could return home to loved ones.

He glanced over at Melissa, whose face was redder than Mama's. If looks could kill, he'd need a corpsman of his own. Why had Mama invited her to the family dinner anyway? She and Gino had barely been engaged a week when he'd enlisted. Talk about a whirlwind romance.

Marc hadn't seen her since that disastrous night at his apartment when he'd totally lost control. He'd talked to the Navy recruiter the next day.

See the world. Whether he was sent to Iraq, Afghanistan, or just another part of the States, it would be far enough away, he supposed.

Seeing Melissa again reminded him of the last face-to-face conversation he'd had with Gino before his brother left home, only to be killed in the mountains of Afghanistan five months later.

Since Gino's death—*Dio*, two months short of two years now, he realized—Marc had buried himself in the running of the resort, losing interest in the frivolous pursuits he'd specialized in since high school.

Gino had been the favored son, the one Mama groomed all his life to take over the family business. Always the dutiful son, Gino had gone to Cornell's Johnson School earning an MBA, just as Mama wanted. He'd returned to Aspen and put the degree to use turning the family's ski lodge into a popular world-class, five-star resort offering all of the amenities.

Marc had opted to attend a nearby college and earn a degree in recreation and leisure studies, hoping to come back to the resort to pursue the things he loved, like skiing and camping. He'd lived the life of a carefree playboy—easy job, easy money, easy women. No one expected anything more from him.

Then Marc had invited Melissa to Aspen late in the summer following their college graduation to meet his family. He and Melissa had dated more steadily since his third year of college. Marc's interest in BDSM had been developing for a few years and Melissa had been a willing participant, the first woman his age to have shown any interest in bondage and discipline.

When Marc had caught Gino in bed with Melissa early one September morning two years ago, the brothers had fought, physically, but also verbally. Gino had everything he could possibly want—and yet he found the need to steal Marc's girl away. It wasn't until much later Marc realized Melissa had set Gino up. But Gino hadn't had time to pursue women and fell head over heels for Melissa, proposing to her that day, whether because he loved her or wanted to rub Marc's face in their relationship, Marc wasn't sure.

Neither of them had seen Melissa for who she really was at that point. Gino probably never did. When the Nine-Eleven attacks happened a week later, Gino surprised everyone by enlisting. He loved his brother, even if they were embattled in a constant rivalry.

Since he'd heard Gino had been killed in action, guilt plagued Marc over the things he'd said to his big brother that day. Had Gino enlisted for patriotic reasons for their adopted homeland—or because Marc had driven him away with his anger and animosity?

He'd loved his brother, even if they had spent most of their lives embattled in an ugly sibling rivalry. Had Marc driven his brother to his death?

Even though that thought had consumed him every day since February 2002, it still had the power to cause his meal to churn in his gut. He laid his fork down.

Mama's voice brought him back to the present. "You have responsibilities here. Who will operate the lodge?"

Anyone the hell but me.

Lord knew, he'd tried. But he and his mother had clashed over every major decision he'd tried to make. Besides, Marc had always been more interested in developing backcountry ski and hiking weekend packages he could lead groups on, not overseeing the day-to-day operations and making sure the payroll and taxes were paid on time.

"I've been showing Alessandro and Carmela how to take over for a couple months now. They're ready for the day-to-day management." His brother and sister took a sudden interest in the lasagna remaining on their plates, afraid of

revealing their duplicity in the plan Marc had put into action two months ago when he'd enlisted.

"Unacceptable!" Her Lombardy accent became more pronounced when she perceived a loss of control. She'd grown up in the war-ravaged Apennine Mountains, where Marc and his siblings had been born, as well. The family ran a ski lodge there, but moved to Aspen when Mama had discovered the name of her father, an American soldier in World War II. Marc's grandfather had helped the family get established in this country and all of the D'Alessios were American citizens now.

"Your place is here. You will just un-join." She acted as though her decreeing such would make it so.

"Not an option, Mama. I fly to Chicago tomorrow to begin training at Great Lakes."

Mama's hand gripped her fork and he couldn't help but think she wished it were protruding from his neck at the moment. Her eyes narrowed. "How can you do this to me, Marco?"

The tears welling in her eyes tugged at Marc's heart, but he wouldn't relent. "Mama, I'm not doing anything *to* you. I'm doing this *for* me."

For my country. For Gino.

Papa, Sandro, and Carmela stared at him in disbelief and something akin to awe. He'd never stood up to Mama before. Melissa just looked as if something was slipping away from her grasp.

"Marco," Melissa began, "how can you do this to your Mama?"

Well, that was new. Concern for his mother? Rich, Melissa. Fucking rich.

Mama's face became redder with Melissa's encouragement. "This family already made the ultimate sacrifice for America. We need not shed any more precious D'Alessio blood in this war."

But the wrong D'Alessio brother's blood was shed.

If anyone had been expendable in the family, it most certainly would have been Marc. Twenty-six years old and when had he ever done something selfless? Noble? Honorable?

Marc wiped the condensation off his wine glass with his thumb, watching a bead of water trickle down the stem. He'd never admitted to his brother how much he admired him, spending all those years being jealous of Gino's status in the family. He'd never have that chance now.

Marc looked up at her, his gaze locking with Melissa's. She hadn't loved Gino the way he'd deserved. She sure as hell didn't love Marc. Was she just some damned gold digger? He dismissed her, not caring what her motives were.

Then he turned to his mother. “I need to do this, Mama.” His voice sounded raspy even to his ears. Marc maintained his gaze with Mama. *You aren’t going to win this one, Mama*. When she looked down at her plate. Marc felt as if the world shifted on its axis. She’d surrendered.

“Well, at least you haven’t joined the Marines,” Mama whispered. “I don’t think I could bear that.”

Gino had served with the Marines. No problem. Marc was tired of trying to compete with his brother. He’d never fill his brother’s shoes as a war hero either, unless he got himself killed, which he didn’t intend to do. So he’d chosen the Navy instead.

“Just be careful, son,” Papa said. “Come home safe.”

“I will, Papa.” Marc placed his red cloth napkin on the table. “Now, if you will all excuse me, I need to relieve the manager at the front desk for the night shift.” Marc had decided he and Sandro would work some of the holiday shifts to give more employees a chance to spend time with their families.

“Sandro, when you’re finished eating, you’re on duty at the concierge desk tonight.”

“I’m finished.” His little brother quickly wiped his mouth, probably anxious to escape the tension in the room, as well. “Mama, may I be excused?”

Mama gave him a nod, but her gaze remained fixed on Marc. Without any acknowledgement of Melissa, Marc turned to leave. He felt Mama’s and Melissa’s gazes boring into his shoulder blades as he exited the dining room.

*

Nearly an hour later, Marc placed the phone in the receiver and sighed. He looked across the hotel lobby at the blazing fireplace surrounded by the festive decorations Carmela had orchestrated. Several couples laughed and flirted as they sipped cocktails and beer, gearing up for an evening of sex, no doubt.

Two years ago, he’d partied with the guests after a long day on the slopes giving ski lessons. Marc had never fit into a business suit. The guests had treated him like one of their own. He preferred to teach ski lessons during the winter months, lead extreme mountain-hiking excursions the other seasons, and provide his own *specialized services* after hours year-round. His gut tightened. He’d given up all three, the last when Gino died.

Right now, though, he had a guest asking for him specifically for some emergency in her cabin. Marc picked up the master-key card and put the “Back in a Moment” sign on the reception desk. He told the bartender at the wet bar in the lobby she’d need to cover the desk for a while.

Marc sauntered over to the Concierge desk. “Sandro, come with me. You’re going to have to deal with these matters after I leave tomorrow.”

At least Sandro showed a knack for the business end of things—and Carmela enjoyed being activities coordinator and working on publicity. They'd do fine. Of course, Mama would continue to pull the strings. She wasn't one to relinquish control.

"You and Carmela have done a great job these past couple months," Marc said as they walked out the service exit. "You're going to do fine."

"Are you sure?"

Marc squeezed his little brother at the nape of his neck. "Hell, yeah, Sandro."

The wind whipped at their faces as they crossed the grounds to one of the more isolated cabins. He wondered what could be wrong. He'd always made sure the resort was maintained to perfection.

Marc knocked and spoke through the door, "Marc D'Alessio!" No answer. He knocked again and heard a woman's voice inviting him to come in. He inserted the key into the lock, turned down the handle, and pushed the door open, motioning for Sandro to precede him.

A couple of steps into the cabin, Sandro came to a dead stop. "Damn!"

Damn was right. Why did he have to have a major freaking problem on his last night? Marc nudged his brother further into the cabin so he could begin to assess the situation.

Oh, shit. On the floor, beside the overstuffed loveseat, knelt a middle-aged woman with brassy red hair and fake boobs, clenching a purple-handled riding crop between her teeth—naked as the day she was born. She also had the nip-tucks to keep everything firmly in place, despite her age.

The woman looked confused as her gaze shifted from Marc to Sandro, then settled on Marc, probably because he was the taller of the two. Her hand reached up to take the crop out of her mouth and asked, "Which one of you is Master Marco?"

Shit. His reputation had preceded him.

Sandro looked at him and grinned. "Is there something you forgot to train me to take over for you, bro?"

Brat.

Marc recalled that week nine years ago when Master Marco had been born. Seventeen, restless, and horny as hell. Then a sexy, bored cougar he'd given ski lessons to took him under her wing at night for some private lessons of her own design. By the time the week had ended, he knew more about bondage and discipline than any under-aged kid ought to know. The euphoric feeling of control and power he'd achieved in Dom space had him hooked for life.

In the beginning, the diversion kept him from going stark-raving mad from boredom. Of course, he'd never taken money from the women. They were

paying enough to stay at the lodge. He was just…an added amenity.

He'd also drawn the line at having intercourse with them. He had friends with benefits for that, although most of them weren't interested in exploring their kinky sides. Until Melissa. So, Master Marco provided a select few in-the-know resort patrons with whatever level of bondage, discipline, and sado-masochistic kink they chose. He preferred bondage and discipline best, though.

When he met Melissa, he thought he'd found himself the perfect submissive. He'd grown tired of catering to bored, rich older women. Most were anything but submissive. Hell, they'd called all the shots. Having them top him from the bottom was about as sexy as stale wine.

But, shit, he had loved turning their asses crimson red with his firm hand or whatever implement from his toy bag they preferred.

But that was then.

Melissa had topped from the bottom, as well. What was he doing to attract such quasi-submissive women? Maybe he needed to take Dom lessons.

He sighed. "I'm sorry, but Master Marco doesn't work here any longer."

Marc politely extricated himself from the indelicate situation and advised Sandro to forget what he'd seen. Master Marco had now officially been eliminated from the amenities offered at the resort.

Someday he'd like to explore the lifestyle with a woman interested in true submission. As he walked back to the lobby, Marc wondered if he'd ever find such a woman—one he could train himself. One who didn't have a plastic face and a pair of matching plastic boobs.

Focus, man.

First, he had a four-year enlistment in the Navy to fulfill. Maybe in that time he'd become a man he could live with.

*

Five months later, May 2004, Camp Pendleton, California

Marc fell back on the rack, too tired to remove his boots. Every muscle in his body ached—some he'd never become acquainted with before. What the hell had he gotten himself into? If he'd known becoming a Navy Hospital Corpsman might land him in the Marines, he'd never have signed the damned papers. Everyone knew that training with the Marine Corps was more intense than any other regular military branch. He could vouch personally that his Great Lakes boot-camp experience was the bunny slope compared to this.

He heard the rack next to him squeak and looked over to see Orlando. The man had just been through the same maneuvers and exercises and looked ready

to go dancing. Shit. Marc had no idea how soft he'd gotten at that cushy desk job.

Orlando looked unhappy, as usual. Never saw someone with a more depressing outlook on life. Maybe he could engage the kid in some conversation. At least Marc's jaw muscles were still in working order.

"So, what got you into the Marines?"

Orlando looked around as if perhaps Marc had been talking to someone else, then his gaze zeroed in on him. "Lost my job."

"What did you do?"

"Bus boy." He said it as if Marc would look down on him or something. Damn, the kid sure had a boulder of resentment on his shoulder.

"That's hard work."

"It was a living. While I had it, anyway."

Clearly, this conversation was going nowhere fast. "So, where you from?"

"Just down the coast. Eden Gardens at Solana Beach."

Again, he looked as if Marc would make some judgment call. He had no freaking clue what Eden Gardens was like, but it sure sounded nice. When he didn't ask where Marc was from, he just decided to volunteer the info. "I'm from Aspen, Colorado, by way of the Lombardy region of Italy."

"Mmm." Orlando removed his boots and began polishing the suede on one of them.

Shit. What the hell could he do to get a response out of the guy? Marc turned onto his side with a groan and propped his head in the palm of his hand. "So, have you ever tied a woman to her bed?"

Orlando's hand came to a stop and he looked up from his boot. Got his attention, at least.

"Once or twice."

Yeah, right. He'd remember if it were once…or twice. But there was a look in his eye that Marc couldn't quite decipher.

"I don't get off on that shit."

"Then you must not be doing it right. Nothing sweeter than the surrender of a submissive woman in restraints."

"Not if she doesn't want to be in them."

"Well, no shit. I'm talking safe, sane, and consensual, good old-fashioned bondage and discipline between consenting adults."

"I had a girlfriend once who was into pain, but I left her. I could never hurt a woman."

"Even if she needed the pain to get off?"

Orlando got a faraway look in his eyes, his hands remaining still, holding the boot and brush. “There was this girl last fall who got herself into a really bad BDSM scene. Fucking pissed me off when I found her. She sure as hell wasn’t enjoying it.” Orlando shook his head. “No thanks.”

“Why didn’t she say her safe word?”

“I’m not sure she didn’t. She was with two guys she barely knew. Not very good at keeping herself safe, I guess.” He looked as if he were a million miles away again. Then slowly he began polishing the boot.

“Some people don’t take enough time to establish trust. Can’t have a power exchange if there isn’t a firm foundation in trust.”

When Orlando silently continued working at the grime on his boot, Marc eased back onto the rack. If he could move, he’d do the same with his boots. Tomorrow morning, he’d have to get up and go through this pain all over again. If he survived reconnaissance training, it would be a miracle.

Gino had gone through Recon Marine training, too. Marc had a new respect for him after a week with this Marine unit. Funny how Marc had tried so hard to avoid going into the Marines—then had wound up in the same damned unit Gino had served in.

Gino hadn’t said much about what he was doing. He’d been sent to Kandahar in the early days of the war to help establish the base there. If Marc made it through training, he wanted to talk with Master Sergeant Montague about the firefight that had taken Gino’s life. The details they’d been given were pretty sketchy.

But there weren’t a lot of opportunities for a corpsman to chat up the Top. Not that he’d ever dare to call the master sergeant a “Top” to his face without permission. Did the man like the common nickname or not?

After months of medical training, including A-School, Marc just hoped he’d be able to save the lives of the men and women in this unit when the time came. *Dio*, he didn’t want to screw up. They would count on him to be there when they needed him.

Oh, shit. What had ever possessed him to enlist? He’d never carried responsibility like this before in his entire fucking life.

*

Two months later, July 2004, Camp Pendleton, California

Iraq. Marc knew it was coming, but knowing they’d be shipping out to a duty station in Fallujah in a week sure made him want to do a few things before he

left. The no-porn, no-sex, no-alcohol rules were going to kill him. He needed to blow off some steam while he still could.

Orlando walked into the barracks and dropped Marc's mail on the rack at Marc's feet. Looked like he'd taken the fetish magazine Marc's little brother, Sandro, had subscribed him to out of the wrapper for a peek.

Marc smiled. "Get into a Tee and khakis. We're going out."

"Where to?"

"Little place up the coast. You're going to love it."

"I don't think so."

"I do. You need an education."

"More training?"

"Something like that."

Twenty minutes later, they were on the 5 in Marc's vintage cherry-red Porsche 911 Carrera, top down, and heading for Los Angeles. He figured that would be far enough off base for them not to run into anyone who would report them up the chain of command. At least he knew they wouldn't find by-the-book Master Sergeant Montague there. The man had to be about the grimmest, meanest hard-ass Marc had ever met.

He'd never found an opportunity to ask his top sergeant about Gino. He knew Montague was involved in the firefight that killed his brother, though. Montague had written a letter to Marc's parents soon after telling them of his regret about Gino's death.

Marc had read the short letter many times after his brother's death, trying to glean some clue as to what had happened. But there weren't many details there. Mostly he'd just shared how honorably Gino had served his unit. Probably just a form letter he sent to all families of the fallen. Maybe someday the two of them would talk about that fatal day in Afghanistan. But it wouldn't be anytime soon.

As the sports car's engine purred, his thumb stroked the underside of the steering wheel. He realized how much he was going to miss his baby. Sandro had agreed to fly out to San Diego later this week to drive her home—agreed a little too enthusiastically for Marc's taste. He hoped he'd get back from Fallujah before the kid blew the engine.

"Nice ride!" Orlando shouted over the wind blowing around them.

"Thanks. What do you drive?"

"Harley."

Shit! This kid has chick-magnet potential, after all.

"Had to sell it to make rent last year, though."

"Crap. That had to suck."

“Yeah. I’m currently a man without wheels—but I guess it won’t matter much after next week.”

Marc hoped there would be at least one woman with a military fetish at the club tonight. With their “Marines” emblazoned camo T-shirts and their high-and-tight haircuts, it was obvious. Marc wore his Navy uniform and insignia on formal occasions, but damn it, he’d earned the title of Marine, as well, during his Recon Marine training and was proud to proclaim it.

He also hoped they had Dom gear available. He’d left his toy bag in Aspen. Wouldn’t be surprised if Sandro was trying out his gear, too, the way he’d become so fascinated by the whole Master Marco fiasco. He shook his head.

“So, where we going again?”

“A little club I heard about.”

“What kind of club?”

“Fetish.”

“Man, I told you I’m not into inflicting pain on *chicas*.”

“No problem. I’ll take care of that part. We’re tag-teaming. You’ll be the master in charge of pleasure. You do know how to please a woman, don’t you, Orlando?” Marc grinned over at him.

The kid sat up straighter in the leather seat. “Well, hell, yeah.”

Marc’s smile widened. He’d known bringing Orlando’s machismo into question would rile him up. Being Italian, Marc knew all about machismo. He’d been weaned on it.

“This place is fairly strict—no penetration except oral, no alcohol other than beer and wine. I know the owner, though. A Navy vet. Jerry served in Vietnam. He’ll make sure we deploy with enough carnal memories to last us for eight months of lonely nights in Iraq. I called and he said he’d find us a fem-sub interested in a threesome.” Marc’s only hard limit over the phone was that she not be Italian.

“I’ve never…”

“Hell, Orlando, we’re headed to a fucking war zone. What better time to try a threesome than now?”

Less than two hours later, they were seated in the social area of the club having beers with the petite redhead Jerry had sent over to get acquainted. Bianca seemed to have a thing for Orlando’s forearm. She kept tracing her sharp red fingernail along its length, then she’d bat her eyes at Orlando, who for some god-damned reason couldn’t quite make eye contact with her.

Come on, kid. She’s interested in you, for Christ’s sake.

She sighed and looked at Marc. “So, what kind of kink are you boys into?”

Marc brushed a burnished lock of hair back from her forehead to get a better look at her green eyes. “Whatever kind of kink you need, pet.”

Her pupils dilated. Marc smiled.

“Well, um, Jerry says I can trust you—or he’ll whup your asses.” She smiled sweetly to belie the threat. “So, how about leather flogger? St. Andrew’s cross? Cunni and fellatio?”

Marc’s cock throbbed. She had him at flogger, one of his favorites. Jerry knew and had probably planted the idea. Fucking patriotic of him.

“Mind if I warm up your backside on the loveseat first? The kid here needs to see how erotic spanking is done.”

Orlando glared at him, but didn’t speak up.

“Sure. Let me go change into something more…appropriate.” She smiled and flounced off toward the dressing rooms.

“We’ll be waiting!” Marc called after her.

“You don’t have to make me sound like a fucking virgin.”

Marc turned to smile at Orlando. “Good, then don’t act like one. When we restrain her on the cross, I’ll let you have first crack at her. Her ass will be pretty sore by then. You can work on her tits and pussy.” Marc glanced down to see the bulge in the kid’s pants. Yeah, he was coming around.

Fifteen minutes later, as he polished off his beer, Marc looked toward the dressing-room entrance to see Bianca strutting toward them in a short, short plaid skirt and a schoolgirl’s white blouse. She held a wooden ruler between her breasts.

Holy shit!

Marc adjusted himself surreptitiously to keep from strangling his cock and stood up.

“You’re late, young lady. Mr. Jerry sent you to me for your punishment thirty minutes ago. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Her pupils dilated again as she caught her breath, and then she cast her eyes down to the floor. “I’m sorry, sir. I was with my friends and just lost track of time.”

Marc took the ruler from her and laid it on the table. He had raided Jerry’s private toy stash while Bianca was dressing and picked up one of the leopard-print cuffs lying beside the ruler. He handed it to Orlando, then picked up Bianca’s hand and extended it to the kid, whose hands shook as he wrapped the cuff around her wrist and tightened it.

“Is that too tight?” Orlando asked.

“No, Sir.”

The kid's pants tented at the title. Marc grinned, then he turned her around and pulled her cuffed hand behind her back while he secured the right wrist and clipped the two together. She kept her head bowed, causing his cock to throb even more. He couldn't wait to turn her over his knee. He picked up a borrowed necktie and blindfolded her.

Grabbing the ruler almost as an afterthought, he motioned for Orlando to take one arm and Marc took the other as they led her to a darkened corner, keeping her from running into any obstacles along the way. He pointed to the far end and Orlando sat down, then Marc lowered Bianca over the armrest at that end until her head rested in Orlando's lap. He wouldn't be able to smack her as hard with his left hand, but the ruler would sting enough.

Marc lifted her short skirt. *Oh, yeah.* No panties. Her round globes were white and begging for some color. "Tell me why you've been sent to the principal's office, Bianca."

"Because I was talking in class, Sir."

Marc reached out and rubbed her ass cheeks vigorously to get the blood to the surface. Then he indicated for Orlando to do the same. The kid's hand reached behind her to gently stroke her ass. Well, it was a start. At least he was touching her. He motioned Orlando's hand away with the ruler.

Smack!

She gasped in the most sensual way. His cock strained against his khakis. Her left cheek soon displayed the mark of the ruler, holes and all. "Tell me what your mouth should be used for instead."

"Fucking, Sir."

"Good answer." She visibly relaxed.

Smack! The right cheek soon bore a matching welt.

Marc nodded to Orlando indicating her head. The kid moved his hand up past her cuffed hands and traced a path up her arm to her hair.

"Tell me how you want to please us with your mouth, pet."

"By sucking your cocks, Sirs."

Smack!

Smack!

Smack!

"Oh!" The pain and frustration were evident in her scream. The last blow landed across her upper thighs, causing her to squirm. Enough of the damned ruler. He needed to feel his hand against her ass, between her legs.

"Stand!" With his and Orlando's help, she was lifted onto her feet again. The disappointment written on her face told him she thought her discipline had ended.

Not even close, pet.

Marc led her to stand in front of the dividing center cushion, facing her toward the social area where they'd negotiated the scene. He sat down, then reached up and took Bianca by the arm, pulling her off balance.

"Oh!"

"We have you," Marc assured her. Yes, she definitely hadn't expected more. Good. He liked to surprise subbies.

He wrapped his arm around her waist while motioning for Orlando to do the same in front of her thighs. Together they lowered her over both their laps, careful not to overstrain her arms. Bianca was positioned so that her abdomen was over Marc's thighs and her ass lifted in the air, giving Orlando a perfect view. Her calves were across the kid's lap and he reached out to stroke her legs with his right hand.

"How are you doing, pet?"

"Fine, Sir." Her voice had gone up an octave to a high squeak.

"What's your safe word?"

"Red, Sir."

"Use it if you need to." Not knowing how much pain she could take, it never hurt to remind her, before the spanking continued in earnest. Hoping to give Orlando and himself better access to her pussy—he reached down and put pressure against her right knee until she spread her legs for him with some hesitation.

Slap!

He brought his right hand down hard against her pink lower right cheek.

Slap!

Then the left.

Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!

Continuing to alternate cheeks, he delivered the blows in quick succession until he heard her gasp. "Ow! Oh, please, Sir."

Marc stopped and rubbed the reddened cheeks, watching her flesh jiggle beneath his hand. His cock pressed against her abdomen. "Please what, pet?"

"Please…more, Sir."

"Are you topping me?" He'd had enough of that shit in Aspen.

She stiffened. "No, Sir! I…forgot my place. Please, Sir, do whatever you wish to do to your pet."

"Good girl." He moved her right leg until it slid off their laps and her foot went to the floor, opening her pussy to them nicely. Orlando's hand was making its way closer to the juncture between her thighs. Marc's next blows went directly to that vulnerable area.

Slap!

Slap!

“Oh, God! I mean, thank you, Sir!”

He slid his finger between her folds. Wet. They had agreed that fingers wouldn’t break the club’s no-penetration limit so he moved down to slide two fingers inside her. Then he pulled out and his wet fingers pressed against the sides of her clit. She moaned. When he touched the swollen nubbin standing erect from its hood, she bucked against his hand.

“Remain still!”

She groaned and he moved his left hand to her lower back to keep her still. Then he delivered his hardest blow yet, against her pussy.

Slap!

“Ow! I…um…thank you, Sir.”

Marc decided he shouldn’t be having all the fun. He moved his hand away and encouraged “Master Pleasure,” sitting like a lump on a log next to him, to take the reins and give Bianca her first orgasm of the evening. The young man surprised him by extricating himself from under her thighs and kneeling on the floor in front of the loveseat. Marc shifted her body to give Orlando better access.

His buddy lowered his face to her pussy and wrapped his arms around her thighs. Marc waited for him to make contact with her sensitive core; then at the same moment, pinched her swollen nipple.

“Oh, my fucking God!”

Marc pinched her harder.

“Sir! I mean, oh God, Sirs!! Please don’t stop!”

He pinched her again. She was forgetting her place. *Slap!* Her topping annoyed him. “You will ask for permission to come.”

“Yes, Sir! I’m sorry, Sir!” Orlando’s tongue must be torturing the poor woman. “Oh! Oh! Oh!” Mark grimaced. Her fevered gasps and writhing body sent his cock into conniptions. Shit, he wished he could bury himself to the hilt inside her pussy to get some relief.

“Oh, please, Sir, may I come?”

Marc heard Orlando sucking at her clit, then he pulled away, releasing the swollen nubbin. The kid nodded before taking the tiny erection in his mouth again.

“Yes, you may, pet.”

Orlando’s head returned to her pussy, shaking back and forth in tiny movements as he tormented her clit.

“Ohhh! Ohhhhhhhh, fuck! Yes! Please…” She moaned, bucking her red ass into the air. Marc’s hand landed on her sweet globes. *Slap! Slap!* “Please, yes, there! Oh, God! Oh, God, Yessss! Yesssssssss!” Her screams filled the room and Marc had no doubt she’d turned heads throughout the club. *Slap! Slap! Slap!* “Ahhhhhhh! Yesssssssssss!”

Her body convulsed on his lap as she went over the top. Orlando’s head movements slowed, but he must have continued to lick her clit, because she bucked a few more times against his face, milking every last drop out of her orgasm.

Shit, she would have made an interesting subbie to train. Getting rid of her tendency to top would have been a challenge he’d welcome. But he didn’t know when he’d be stateside again. Not fair to make her wait. Someday he’d find the woman who would complete his Dom side.

But, for now, he and Orlando had needs to be taken care of by one smart-mouthed subbie. Orlando leaned back with a pussy-eating grin on his face and a whole lot of her juices glistening against his lips, chin, and nose. Marc nodded and watched Orlando’s chest swell.

Well done, man.

Section Four
The Unbreakable Bond Forms

November 2004, Fallujah, Iraq

Damián hunkered down, awaiting orders. Sergeant Miller signaled for Grant and Wilson to cover the south-facing wall, while he and Sarge took the east. The insurgent weapons fire seemed to be coming from the east, which made sense based on their recon, but he was beginning to think there was more than one enemy stronghold holding this rooftop in its sites.

Despite being in country four months, this was his first real battle since arriving in Fallujah. Sure, there had been some roadside bombings. Those happened almost every day—and still scared the shit out of him. Never could predict or prepare for them. But his battle training really kicked in today. Now, if only they could get out of here with the unit intact.

Damián preferred the earlier days of this battle for this city, when they'd let him use his sniper skills against the insurgents. But the shaky truce limited him to firing only in defensive situations. He knew the insurgents had placed a bounty on Marine snipers. And for good reason.

Their latest intel indicated there was a prime target in a building a thousand yards away and they'd continue to wait until they had a chance at taking their shot. They'd taken turns watching for hours today. Nothing.

Unlike most Marines, Orlando saw the faces of his targets clearly. His high-powered scope homed in on their faces, their eyes, their weapons. And when he hit center mass, even saw the expressions on their faces as they fell dead. One shot, one kill.

But sometimes he replaced their images with those of the Jerk-off who pimped Savannah's body out. Or the two sadists who tortured her. Even her sugar daddy.

Damián sighed.

"He's gone to ground," Sarge announced after getting the latest radio transmission. He ordered everyone on the rooftop to take advantage of the lull and grab a Meal, Ready-to-Eat from their gear. At first, he had appreciated being able to eat a hot meal on the run, but if he saw another beef stew MRE as long as he lived, he'd barf. They ate in silence, each of them probably wondering if they'd manage to complete this mission.

Damián's mind wandered back to what had gotten him to this rooftop in Iraq. After being fired from the hotel, he'd tried for weeks to find another job.

Nothing. He'd sold his Harley, but not for nearly as much as it was worth. After a few months, when he could no longer make rent, he'd been evicted from his apartment. The only option he could see was to join the Marines.

It hadn't been a bad gig. He liked being a Marine. He'd been afraid it would be like being in juvie hell again—but the discipline and structure here were different. He wasn't just out to survive on his own. He had his buddies to look after, too. He knew they were looking out for him, too. A band of brothers. Well, Grant wouldn't take kindly to being called a brother, but she was as tough as the rest of them.

He'd also met some good friends he expected to keep for life. Sergeant Miller, the blunt African-American from East St. Louis, had fought alongside him on recon and sniper missions since Damián had been in Fallujah.

Lance Corporal Grant, sitting against the other wall, had become a great friend, too. She was easy to talk to. Hard-edged, but honest. He didn't usually have female friends, but she was a Marine first—just one of the guys—and a damned good listener. He'd even told her about Savannah. Damián admired Grant's kick-ass strength. Maybe, being a woman, she had to come across even tougher just to show her worth among the guys.

Grant sure made it clear from the start she wasn't here to be a Marine Mattress—having sex with any and all Marines interested. He liked that about her, not that he hadn't noticed her physical attributes. Blonde, five-nine, muscular build. She just wasn't interested in anything more than friendship with the men in the unit. Said she preferred to top anyway and that she couldn't picture any of them tied to her bed. Hell and hell no! So, the two of them were just going to remain buddies.

Then there was Doc. Damián smiled. The Navy corpsman he'd roomed with back at Pendleton sure did keep things interesting. At first, the guy had pissed him off royally. Arrogant. Privileged. Driving a freaking Porsche. What the hell was he doing in the Marines? But over the months since that night at the sex club, the man had grown on him. His unit couldn't ask for a better corpsman. He'd patched up just about everyone at some point or other. Luckily, only for minor injuries. He hoped that remained true today.

Damián still remembered Doc dragging his ass to that fetish club, where he'd learned BDSM wasn't all about violence and inflicting pain. That was just plain wrong. It was about a consensual exchange of power. Having control over another—and yourself. Making sure her needs were met before thinking about your own. He could understand that. Definitely something he might be interested in trying when he got stateside again.

Damián wondered when he'd ever get the chance to be with another woman. He'd sure enjoyed himself with that redhead. He smiled.

"What's so funny?" Sarge asked.

"Just thinking about what a fucking great life I have in the Corps."

Sarge grunted. "Yeah, right. I'll bet you were thinking about some sweet pussy waiting for you back in California."

Damián's smile faded.

Ah, Savannah.

He'd replayed the scene at Thousand Steps Beach over and over in his head. He and Savannah had connected so perfectly that day. He'd never been with a woman who turned him on as much or responded to him as well as she had. He thought it had been good for her, too. So, why had she ignored his attempts to contact her? He was in the phone book. She could have called him. She knew his name. He regretted not exchanging phone numbers, but the best he'd been able to do was leave printed messages in the mailbox at her gate. No response.

Well, he'd also staked out the hotel in La Jolla for a few weeks. She hadn't returned, at least not while he'd waited for her there. What had become of her? Had she continued to let men abuse her for money? He gave his head a mental shake. He didn't like to think she'd returned to that life.

No, he preferred to picture her going to college, getting her degree. Maybe she'd go on to become the social worker she'd wanted to be. Help kids who needed her. That's what he hoped…

The rocket-propelled grenade came over the wall and rolled to land mere feet from Sarge's hip. Damián froze. No one fucking moved. He looked over at Sarge, who just kept eating. He didn't fucking see it. Grant and Wilson kept talking, oblivious, too. After what seemed like an eternity, Damián shoved Sarge to move, shouting, "Take cover!" Sarge bolted up and grabbed Damián's arm, propelling him in front of him. Damián's body felt like it was moving through thick mud. Everything happened in slow motion. He couldn't move fast enough.

Grant and Wilson reacted at last, but too damned slowly. Damián rushed toward them, trying to push them toward the other end of the rooftop. At the last moment, Damián turned to check on Sergeant Miller, who was right behind him. The blast deafened his ears, the percussion of the explosion knocking him backwards, hard against someone. They went sprawling across the roof.

Mother fucking insurgents.

It felt like a fucking wall had fallen on top of his chest. His foot was on fire. He opened his eyes and saw Sarge's head, or what was left of it, lying on his chest. The man's bloody brains showed through the hole in his head. Sarge's

body lay prone across Damián's chest and abdomen. The pool of blood forming on Damián's chest felt warm. What the fuck?

A roaring in his ears merged with high-pitched screams. Then he realized the screams were his.

"*Madre de Dios*! No! Sarge, don't you fucking die!"

He knew Sarge was gone, but kept yelling at him as if he could bring him back by the sheer volume of his voice. He looked up and watched as Grant and Wilson, on either side of him, lifted Sarge off him. Damián turned his head away, watching in horrific fascination as Sarge's blood ran down the rooftop toward Damián's feet, where it mingled with another pool of blood. The one forming around his own mangled foot.

What the fuck?

"Corpsman up!" Wilson called.

How could that be his blood? He didn't feel the burning pain in his foot anymore. As he stared, the image blurred. A wave of dizziness caused his stomach to lurch. He was going to lose his MRE. His head slumped back against the warm concrete.

Serious fucked up shit. Was he going to die here? Dreams of returning home and finding Savannah faded. The sun disappeared into a cloud. Sudden blackness. Damián closed his eyes.

Such a fucking wasted life.

*

"Corpsman up!"

Shit. Marc heard the call come from the rooftop of the building across the street. Holed up in the make-shift command headquarters, he grabbed for his pack and a litter.

"We've got your back, Doc," Master Sergeant Montague yelled, then he and several other grunts moved into position near the doorway and windows with their rifles leveled at the buildings where they suspected insurgents were still hidden. Marc ran out of the abandoned house toward the one across the street where the recon team had been staked out for the last couple of hours.

The rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire echoed behind him and from a nearby building as he zigzagged across the street. He dodged the bullets stirring up sand and dust around him. Lucky for him, the stairway to the roof on the outside of the building had a high cement wall he could crouch behind as he made his way upstairs.

When he reached the roof, he stuck his head around the corner to assess the situation. Two Marines down, two upright. Marc stayed low as he crossed the roof and hunkered down beside the one with the worst injuries. A quick check of

Sergeant Miller's nonexistent pulse and the damage to his head told him he needed to focus his efforts on the other one.

Two grunts crouched nearby over this one. Orlando. *Fuck, no!* Grant had a white-knuckled grip on the wounded man's hand. His buddy's boot—and foot—had been blown clean off, leaving a bloody stump of bone, tissue, and an exposed artery. Losing blood fast.

Shit. Don't you die on me, Orlando!

"Orlando! It's Doc. You're going to be fine."

The man opened his pain-filled eyes, clenching his teeth to keep from screaming. Sweat broke out on the younger man's forehead. Marc put on his gloves and pulled a tourniquet from the bag. Orlando groaned and tried to raise his head to see the damage.

"Keep his head down!" Marc ordered Wilson and Grant. The last thing he needed was for Orlando to see his foot and sink into shock.

Even though Marc was seven years older than Orlando, he'd connected with the man during training at Pendleton. Orlando had been so damned serious. Marc had loved finding ways to get him to lighten up. The kid also had a huge chip on his shoulder back then. He'd acted like the whole damned world was against him. It had taken the Corps a while to knock that shit out of him, but you couldn't ask for a better Marine. Marc had been impressed by the strength and courage the man had shown. He was one of the best sharpshooters in the unit, which is probably what landed him on this rooftop in the first place.

Marc applied the tourniquet and bandaged the bloody stump.

"Grenade came over the wall," said Wilson, holding the kid's forehead. "Orlando and Miller saw it first. Orlando shoved Grant and me away. Sergeant Miller took the brunt of the explosion." Wilson looked over at Miller and closed his eyes tightly.

The sergeant was the first fatality the recon unit had suffered. Marc had learned to stay numb most of the time. Since the scene with Gino over Melissa, he'd never been one to show much emotion, so it hadn't been hard to do. He wouldn't even try to process the loss of Miller's life for a while.

Focus on the living.

Marc checked Orlando for other wounds, but didn't find any visible ones, not that this one wasn't serious enough.

"How bad, Doc?" Orlando spoke through gritted teeth, his lips whitened by the effort not to scream. Despite the kid's bravado, he looked scared shitless. The young man was about to get a lesson in maturity no one should have to learn. If it didn't kill him first.

Marc tried to remain calm, even though his heart beat so fast he was sure Orlando could hear it. He doubted the surgeons would be able to reattach the foot, but as his corpsman, he'd do his damnedest to keep him alive until they could take over. If Orlando was lucky, the amputation site would be low enough not to cause too many problems later on.

"Your foot's pretty banged up. I'm going to hook you up to an IV and we'll have you medevacked out of here in no time."

"Will I lose it?" he whispered, as if afraid to put the idea out there too loud for the universe to act on.

"The surgeons will do all they can." He needed to get Orlando's focus on something more positive. "You'll probably be going home soon."

Orlando tensed in pain, gripping Grant's hand even tighter, and then his body slumped against the roof, his head lolling to the side. The kid's body began to shake. Shock. Marc inserted the IV needle and adjusted the drip then heard the scream of an incoming mortar round.

Instinctively, he shielded Orlando's chest and head with his own body, spreading his arms out to cover as much of his wounded buddy as he could. The blast hit the wall beside him, taking out a portion of the cement structure. Marc felt chunks of cement slam into his back and side, stinging the skin where he didn't have protection from the SAPI plate.

Fucking sitting ducks.

Marc shouted, "Let's get him off the roof!"

"Sure thing, Doc!"

"Staging area's across the street. I'll send up a 9 Line request." Marc knew it could take up to ten minutes for the medevac chopper to arrive. "Then we'll come back for Miller."

As Marc made the call, he gasped for air. What the hell? He watched the two grunts load Orlando onto a litter, pick it up, and start for the stairs. Marc rose to his feet to follow, but felt a crushing weight against his side and chest. He tried to catch his breath, but couldn't fill his lungs with air.

He managed to fight the pain and take a few steps before his vision blurred. The pain in his side was so fucking sharp, it inhibited his ability to breath. Gasping for air, he watched the rooftop stairway swim before his eyes. He pitched forward into blackness.

*

Adam wondered why his last tour had to be so fucked up. If he could get his units out of Fallujah without major casualties, it would be a miracle. He hoped the RPG he'd heard explode hadn't resulted in serious injuries, but knew Doc would take care of his troops. He always did.

While the Coalition Forces still seemed to have the upper hand, Adam knew there were many more bloody days ahead before they'd be able to claim the Sunni stronghold. He just wanted to finish up this deployment and get everyone home in one piece. He was getting too old for this shit. He'd retire as soon as he got stateside again.

The scream of a mortar round brought him back to full alert. The blast looked like it had hit the rooftop where his recon team was. *Fuck*. He needed to get up there. He turned over operations here and had managed to get across the street, hunkered down in the stairwell, when he looked up and saw Wilson and Grant rushing down the stairs bearing a litter.

Adam stood and provided cover for them. *Damn*. Who'd gotten hit? He and the remaining troops inside the staging building continued to pepper the area with gunfire as Adam followed the grunts with the litter back across the street. Once inside, he looked down at the unconscious Orlando.

"Doc radioed for the 9 Line Medevac, sir," Grant reported.

Good. He needed to get the kid out of here. Adam looked through the doorway, expecting to see the corpsman. And where was Miller? No one else came down the stairway.

"Where's Doc? Miller?" Adam barked.

"I thought Doc was right behind us. Maybe he stayed with Miller, sir," Wilson said as he covered Orlando with a blanket. "Miller didn't make it."

God fucking damn. He'd lost another man. "I'm going back over there." Adam put his helmet on and adjusted the strap.

"Right behind you, sir," Grant said.

"Grab a litter." Doc's job was to save lives. He'd be upset about losing Miller, even if he couldn't have prevented it. Although Doc had been trained to use his rifle, Adam knew the corpsman wouldn't be thinking about protecting himself right now. No Marine left behind.

They headed across the street, insurgent gunfire spraying bullets at them as they ran. At the top of the stairs, they turned the corner and found Doc lying face down. A few feet away lay Miller, his head blown apart.

Fuck. No hope for Miller.

Doc's right side was covered in blood that had soaked into his camo and had begun to pool by his outstretched arm. His medical bag lay beside him. Several pieces of shrapnel had embedded themselves deep in the back of the SAPI plate, but some must have entered the side of his torso where the plate didn't provide protection.

Doc gasped for air.

“Get the scissors out of his bag!” Adam screamed, then surveyed the damage.

God damn it! A piece of cement steel protruded from the side of the corpsman’s chest, under his arm. While Grant rooted in the bag, Adam reached out and placed his hand on Doc’s shoulder. “Hang on, Doc. We’ll have you out of here in no time.” Adam accepted the scissors from Grant and cut the camo away, being careful not to jar the projectile.

No telling how much of it was buried in his chest or which organs had been damaged. A number of small pieces of shrapnel were embedded in his skin, as well. Pressing the walkie-talkie button on his shoulder device, Adam shouted, “Wilson! Check the ETA for the 9 Line. Doc’s in bad shape.” Adam didn’t know if Doc had even gotten off the request before he’d collapsed.

He took a bandage from the bag and cut it to the center, then pressed it on the skin against the wound around the metal, sealing the wound as best he could without shifting the metal protruding from his side. He hoped.

The walkie-talkie squawked. “Three to four mikes,” Wilson reported.

“Doc! Stay with me!” He hoped the man had those three or four minutes. Blood trickled from the corpsman’s mouth. The steel projectile must have punctured his lungs. Adam felt so fucking helpless.

To his surprise, Doc gave them a thumbs-up sign. He’d thought the man had been unconscious. Then Adam heard the Blackhawk approaching. *Thank you, Jesus*.

Small-arms fire reached a fever pitch around them. His other units must have located the insurgent holdout. He hoped there were no more casualties. This had been the worst battle his units had fought this entire deployment.

Another clusterfuck. He’d almost gotten them all home safely this time.

Wilson arrived a few moments later leading the medevac team. Adam backed away from Doc’s side as the medical team threw the litter and supplies down, unloading the instruments they’d need to save Doc’s life. Please, God, don’t let me lose D’Alessio.

His mind flashed to Kandahar. Another D’Alessio. Fucking Christ, he needed to check and see if there was a connection. He’d gotten so used to calling this one Doc, he hadn’t thought about the two men having the same surname. Maybe his mind hadn’t wanted him to process the name and be reminded of one of the two men he’d lost in that ambush.

Shit. Was Doc related to Gino D’Alessio?

Adam watched helplessly as they listened for lung sounds in Doc’s chest. “Pneumothorax, maybe even hemo-pneumo. Let’s just load and go!”

As the medivac team prepared Doc for transport, Adam motioned for Wilson and Grant to help him load Miller's body. They carried the litters down the stairs, Doc's going down first. Four other grunts brought Orlando's litter from the staging area. The kid lay unconscious. Thank God for small favors. At least he hoped he was just unconscious.

At the chopper, Adam watched helplessly as two of his men were loaded, to be taken to the Combat Support Hospital. He surrendered Miller's body to them, as well, for transport to the Marine morgue at the same location. Another angel.

God, don't let me lose any more of my troops.

While You're at it, get the rest of my units the fuck out of Fallujah in one piece.

*

"Orlando?"

Marc's throat was raw. His chest burned as if a fire-breathing dragon had taken up residence there. The nurse looked down at him with a puzzled look on her face.

"What, sweetie?"

"How's Orlando?"

"I don't think we have a patient here by that name, but I'll check when I get back to the desk. Maybe he's already been taken to Ramstein." She put the blood-pressure cuff around his arm and inflated it. When he opened his mouth to ask another question, she admonished, "Don't talk." After she recorded the information in the chart, she said, "You'll probably be heading to Germany yourself in a few days. We're just waiting for your lung to re-expand fully before we fly you out."

Pneumothorax. That explained why his chest hurt so badly. He didn't remember anything other than trying to stabilize Orlando. The nurse stuck a thermometer under his tongue. Marc closed his eyes. Keeping them open required more energy than he could muster. Why was he so damned tired?

"Your master sergeant came by to visit earlier. I told him you'd probably be up to having visitors tomorrow."

Marc didn't even know where "here" was. Must be the CSH in Fallujah, if Montague was here. His eyelids grew so heavy he didn't try to open them again, even after she pulled the thermometer out of his mouth.

"Temperatures up a little." The nurse patted his forearm. "That's right, sweetie. You just get some sleep and let your body heal. A hemo-pneumothorax isn't anything to mess with."

Hemo, too? Blood in the lungs. Shit.

When he awoke again, the room was dark. Marc knew he wasn't alone, but didn't know who sat in the corner until he heard him speak.

"'Bout time you woke up." Master Sergeant Montague moved his chair closer to Marc's bed.

Marc smiled. "Getting lazy in my old age, sir." His voice sounded raspy and weak.

Montague grunted. "Don't tell me about old." Marc looked at his top sergeant and thought he did look older than the last time he'd seen him. Dark circles under the man's eyes told of sleepless nights. Worry. Or worse.

Miller. Oh, *Dio*, they'd lost Miller. But what about Orlando? The others? Had anyone else died? Is that why the master sergeant had come to visit him personally? Marc couldn't form the words to ask.

"How you feeling?"

Marc shrugged. His chest didn't burn as much as it had earlier.

"You've been out of it a couple days. Quite a fever. They said they'll keep you here until they know there's no more infection."

Marc nodded. Even that small exertion made him tired. He tried to take a deep breath, but couldn't quite fill his lungs. He closed his eyes and took several shallow breaths, fighting the panic over feeling smothered all the time. Why didn't the Top tell him about Orlando? Had the kid made it?

Christ, he had to know. "How's Orlando?" he whispered.

Montague ran a hand through his hair. Marc's heart hammered against his chest, reigniting the fire. Oh, *Dio*, no! He took several more shallow breaths, trying to regulate his heartbeat and relieve the stress on his heart and lungs. Was he ready to hear the words he'd been dreading since he'd come to?

"I should have said something sooner. I'm sorry. They couldn't reattach the foot."

The breath Marc had held whooshed out, releasing some of the burning from his chest. "He's alive?"

Montague's eyes opened wider in surprise. "Oh, hell, yeah, Doc. Shit. I thought you knew that much."

As best he could, Marc breathed a sigh of relief.

"You did great work. You always do. Grant told me you shielded Orlando and took the brunt of the mortar attack yourself."

Marc looked away. If someone had told him a year ago he'd have been prepared to lay down his life for another, he'd have said they were crazy. But for the first time in his life, with this small band of Marines, he felt a part of something so much bigger than himself. A noble cause. A desire to think of his buddies before himself.

The master sergeant looked away and rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know why I didn’t make the connection sooner. You’re Gino D’Alessio’s brother.”

“Yeah.” Marc had been wanting to ask Montague about him since before they deployed, but there never had been an opportunity.

Fire burned the backs of Marc’s eyes. He closed the lids before he embarrassed himself. He’d always wanted to know the details about how Gino had died. Now, he needed to know how he’d lived and fought. Had he wanted to serve?

He opened his eyes and stared at Montague a long moment. “Sir, was Gino a good Marine?”

Montague looked down at the floor, unable to maintain eye contact. His voice was a harsh whisper. “Damned fine Marine. One of the best men who’s ever served under me.” He looked up at Marc. The pain in his face took Marc’s breath away again. “I’m sorry I got him killed.”

Marc didn’t understand. It was an ambush. Bad intel. How could that be the master sergeant’s fault?

“I trusted the wrong people.” His Top looked down at his hands. “We’d worked with these Afghan soldiers for months. They swore we had friendlies in the village. I led my men into a fucking ambush. Called for air support. No helos available. Called for Hotel Echo…” he said, referring to high-explosive artillery shells. “Nothing. I should have made sure those things were in place before we went in. I shouldn’t have trusted anyone.”

Would Gino have been alive if there had been backup? Maybe. But the master sergeant wasn’t to blame for the lack of it. Marc knew enough about the insanity that takes place in a war zone to know those things just happened sometimes. You can’t predict and plan for everything. You couldn’t know who to trust. The enemy and the US-backed foreign military all looked alike. Infiltrators were common.

“I don’t blame you, sir.”

The master sergeant reached up to rub the back of his neck again. “Your brother was one of my best.” He glanced up at Marc. “I’m not just saying that to make you feel better, either. He was my lead scout in the recon unit. When we drew gunfire, he and another member of the team hunkered down behind some boulders. They returned fire. But we were taking it from all sides. From the village. From the caves in the cliffs above us. Total clusterfuck.”

He paused, looking down again, deep in thought. Then he looked back at Marc. “Clearly, you’re brothers.”

Puzzled, Marc furrowed his brow. “I don’t understand, sir.”

“When an incoming mortar round came at them, your brother shielded his buddy from the blast. Just like you did for Orlando.”

Marc could see the scene as if he were there. Tears welled in his eyes and he turned away. Gino, the brother he’d admired growing up, who had done everything right. Gino who loved serving as a Marine. Gino who had even died right, saving someone else. Images of his big brother’s body being blown apart by flying rock and debris as he’d tried to protect someone else forced Marc to place his arm over his eyes, hoping to block the image out. No such luck.

Marc regretted that they’d fought over some damned woman the last time they’d been together. He’d never again let a woman come between him and the ones he loved.

Had Gino been with Marc on that rooftop a few days ago, guiding him in how to honor the Reconnaissance Marine’s Creed? Regardless, he felt a bond with his brother he’d never imagined he would experience again after Gino had been killed.

Montague reached out to grasp Marc’s forearm and squeezed, bringing his back to the present. Marc had to know one more thing. “Did he succeed?”

The older man looked thrown off by his question, then realization dawned and he smiled. “Hell, yeah. Sent his buddy home to his wife and newborn baby. If you’d like to meet them sometime when we get stateside, I’ll hook you up.”

Marc had to clear his throat to speak. “I’d like that very much, sir.” How soon would he be shipped home? Would this injury put an end to his service? “I’m not ready to go home yet, sir. You think they’ll let me return to the unit after I recover?”

“Above my pay grade. What’ll you do if they send you home?”

Marc knew the chances of remaining on active duty were slim. He thought for a moment about his options. “Guess I’ll go back to Colorado. Not sure what I’ll do once I get there.”

“Why not go to school and train for something in the medical field? You’re damned good at it, you know.”

“Maybe. I’ll think about it.”

The worry lines on the man’s face relaxed a bit. “I’m retiring after this tour. Maybe I’ll just follow you to Colorado. My wife always loved the mountains there. Still thinking that’s where I want to go, even without…” The master sergeant looked down and twirled his wedding band. “Thinking I’ll move to Denver and start a fetish club.”

Marc wasn’t sure what the appropriate response would be, so he remained silent. Was the man serious or joking? Then he realized he was dead serious.

“Well, maybe I’ll just join your club. I was known as Master Marco back in the day.”

Montague laughed. “Thought you might be like-minded. Saw you and Orlando at a fetish club in L.A. just before we deployed.”

Oh, shit. They were lucky they weren’t busted. Then again, if the master sergeant was there, too…. Talk about a “Top.”

Montague grew serious again. “My wife Joni and I talked about owning our own club. Those years between the Gulf War and Kosovo were some of the best in our marriage. Total power exchange.” He remained lost in the memories.

Marc had never found a woman willing to do a power exchange with him. He realized he hadn’t even come close with Melissa.

Could he ever open himself up to another woman? Everyone thought the Dom in the relationship had the power, but that was nonsense. The sub held all the power. He’d like to find a woman he could trust completely.

The master sergeant continued, breaking into his thoughts. “We wanted to show others how satisfying a Dom/sub relationship could be for the right couples. Planned to live off my pension and open our house up for weekend classes and BDSM scening.”

“I’d like to meet her someday.”

Adam looked at him, pain filling his eyes. “I lost her to cancer two years ago.”

Shit. “I’m sorry to hear that, sir. I didn’t know.” Maybe that explained something about why the man had been such a hard ass in those early months after Marc had joined the Marine unit. He sure didn’t seem like one once you got talking with him.

Silence fell between them. Uncomfortable, Marc blurted out, “Until I sort out my future plans, I’d be happy to help you get the club started. I’ll need a diversion.”

“I might just take you up on that.” Montague stood. “Now, get better so you can get home and start living again.”

Marc realized he hadn’t started to live in the first place until he’d joined the Navy and then been assigned to the Marines. If he was discharged, would that end? The thought of what lay ahead scared him. He’d changed since enlisting. He wanted his life to stand for something. He definitely had no plans to work at the family’s ski resort. No, he was going to make a difference in some way.

Damned straight.

But doing what?

*

Two months later, January 2005, Ramstein Air Force Base, Ramstein, Germany

"*Take cover!*"

Grenade. Move. Damn it, move! Damián slammed his body against his buddies, trying to push them away before the damned thing went off. The world exploded. Blood. Pain. So damned much pain. Grant and Wilson standing over him. Damián tried to get up. What had fallen on him? Dizzy. Sarge. Where was Sarge? Damián opened his eyes and saw his sergeant's bloody brains spilled over his chest.

"*Madre de Dios! No! No! No!*"

Damián jolted awake from a dead sleep, his screams reverberating through his ears. Sweat trickled into his eyes. His heart pounded like a sledgehammer, igniting a responsive throbbing in his right foot. The lingering effects of his nightmare receded by slow degrees, but the pain in his foot persisted. He sat up, shoving the sheet aside, and reached down to massage away the ache.

Thin air. He stared at the bandaged stump above where his foot should be.

Fuck.

He closed his eyes and slumped back against the pillow and sheet, both of them cold and wet from his sweat. How many times would it take before he stopped reaching for something that wasn't there? He'd left the damned thing behind in Fallujah. But the phantom continued to haunt and taunt him every time he fell asleep.

Damián stared up at the ceiling. What in the hell was he going to do when they sent him home? They'd told him he'd be taking rehab in San Diego for a few months. But what were they rehabilitating him for?

Would he ever be able to ride his Harley again? Hold down a job?

Carry Savannah to their Laguna cave?

Well, he didn't have to worry about that one. He'd had dreams of returning home to her as a man, finding her, and convincing her she belonged with him. He wanted to take care of her, slay whatever dragons pursued her, and love her the way she should be loved….

But he wouldn't be carrying her anywhere ever again. He wouldn't saddle her with a cripple, even if he could find her. She deserved a whole man—nothing less to match her perfection. He tucked away the memories of their one idyllic day at the beach. Those images would have to last him the rest of his life.

He should have just fallen on the grenade and been done with it. Why hadn't he? A hero would have done that. They'd pinned a god-damned Purple Heart on his chest a few days ago, but he'd stowed it away in his seabag. All he'd done

was get wounded—and let a man die. Why did he need a fucking reminder medal for that?

If he'd been a true hero, he'd have saved Sarge's life. The man had a wife and three kids back home. *Fuck*. Just months from returning home and he'd been killed by a fucking hand grenade. So damned senseless.

Dios, you took the wrong Marine home.

Damián heard a squeaking wheel and looked up. "Doc? What are you doing here?" The corpsman wore a hospital robe that barely fit across his shoulders. He wheeled an IV pole that kept veering away from him. Each time, he'd pull it back in line.

Damián had heard what the man had done to save him from further injury. Doc had taken the very shrapnel in his chest that might have finished the job for Damián. Another wasted opportunity. Another man became a casualty because of him.

"Just got here this morning. Took me a little longer to get out of Fallujah than you." Damián watched as Doc's gaze roamed over him, head to foot…and stub. His gaze stopped to linger there a little longer, then returned to Damián's face. "Wanted to see how you were doing."

"Can't complain." *Not out loud, at least.* "How about you?"

"Coming around. Should be headed home in a week or so if the infection doesn't come back." Doc took a series of shallow breaths as if the exertion of walking and talking had taken a toll on him.

"Take a load off, Doc."

"Thanks." He pulled the chair closer to the bed. "How about you? Any news on when you'll head home?"

Home. He had no home to go to anymore. He'd always dreamed about having a home with Savannah. But that dream had faded one November day on a rooftop in Fallujah.

"Nah. They say I'm headed eventually to the Naval Medical Center near Pendleton for rehab."

The two remained silent for a moment. Doc broke the solitude and asked, "Then what?"

Stunned by the question, Damián just sat there and stared back at him. He really had no fucking clue what he'd do after that. He didn't even see himself finishing rehab. What would be the point? Damián shrugged.

"Don't you have a girl waiting for you?"

Damián looked away. "No. There was one once, but she was out of my league."

“You’re a Marine now. You’re going to find you’re in a league of your own. You’ll have women falling at your feet.”

Damián met Doc’s gaze and said, “Foot, you mean.” He pointed at the stub.

“Nobody’s perfect. You have a lot more going for you than looks and a body. The right woman will overlook shit like that if she really loves you.” Doc ended his speech by sucking several more breaths into his lungs.

Damián wished the man wouldn’t get so riled up. No way would he change his mind. First chance he had, he’d put an end to this miserable life. When Doc caught his breath, he asked, “Does she even know what’s happened?”

“No. We haven’t kept in touch.”

“Maybe if she knew…”

“I don’t even fucking know where she is!” Damián regretted his tone as soon as the words came out. “Sorry, Doc. It was nothing more than a day of hot sex with a Latino on the beach. Let’s just drop it.”

“Orlando, you have more integrity, courage, and honor than anyone she’ll ever meet again.”

Those words burned in his craw more than any others. “I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I didn’t do anything courageous. Sarge is dead. You got wounded trying to save my sorry ass. You guys are the heroes, not me.”

Damián’s chest hurt now, too. He put his forearm over his eyes to hide the embarrassing tears that sprang from nowhere. “I’d like to get some sleep now.” He knew his voice sounded ungrateful, but didn’t care.

“I’ll see you later.”

Madre de Dios. I wish everyone would fucking leave me alone to just rot and die.

Courage? Integrity? Honor? No fucking way. He was nothing but a lousy Chicano scared shitless. What the hell was he going to do now?

*

Marc slowly made his way back to his room. Sweat broke out on his forehead and his legs shook at the effort. Just this short excursion left him feeling as weak as a runt-of-the-litter *gattino* refused its mama’s tit. When would he experience the simple pleasure of filling his lungs with air again?

His talk with Orlando haunted him. The kid was fucking wrong if he thought women would never want him again. Maybe that one girl had broken up with him, but that was before he’d become a Marine. Women loved Marines. Especially heroes like Orlando.

Right now, Orlando’s feelings of hopelessness worried Marc the most. He needed to get through to him before the kid was shipped back to San Diego. Chances of seeing him again after that were slim.

He'd talk with the nurses to be sure they stayed on top of the man's depression. He knew they were monitoring him already. Depression was common for an amputee. But Orlando meant a lot to him. They'd trained together to be recon Marines. They'd even played hard together. He remembered the redhead at the L.A. fetish club. Orlando didn't need a foot to please a woman.

Dio, he didn't want the kid to become another suicide casualty.

Marc entered his room and saw his bed ahead of him, hoping he'd get there before his legs gave out. So fucking weak. So close…

"Marco!"

Mama? Marc turned slowly to find both of his parents standing in the doorway.

Shit.

"Mama? Papa? What are you doing here?" They had a business to run. This was the height of the skiing season. His mother came toward him. *Dio*.

"When we heard you were injured…" Were those tears in her eyes? She reached up and stroked his cheek, and he just marveled at what looked like real tears streaming down Mama's plump face. For him?

"We've been waiting for you here in Germany…." Her voice cracked and she wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

"Waiting for you to get out of the hospital in Iraq," Papa finished.

Marc noticed the dark circles under both their eyes. Their clothes looked as if they'd slept in them. How long had they been waiting here? Why hadn't they booked a hotel room?

"I'm fine. You didn't have to come all this way."

"They said you almost died," Mama said.

Who told her that? He hadn't been that bad off.

"They said you saved a man's life," she said, then smiled, her mouth quivering.

Marc turned away. He sure as hell wasn't a hero. The heroes were people like Miller and Orlando. Like Gino.

"I was just doing my job, Mama."

"Well," said Papa, "we want you to know we're proud of you, son. The whole family is so proud of you."

Marc looked from one to the other. While having them be proud of him wasn't his goal or even anything he cared about, for some strange reason, the words made him feel better. Then Mama wrapped her arms around him. She hadn't done that since he was a little boy. He'd always been in trouble, and was

more likely than his brothers to be punished. Marc put his arms around her shoulders and hugged her in return.

“I hated that you joined the military, Marco. But that was just because of Gino…. I didn’t want you to…”

Marc pulled away to look down into her eyes. Tears streamed down her face and she did nothing to wipe them away this time. Papa wrapped an arm around her, too, obviously as stunned by her emotional state as Marc was.

“Mama, you won’t believe this, but I’m actually serving with Gino’s unit. With his master sergeant even.”

“No!”

When Mama looked as though she’d collapse, he and Papa grabbed her by either side and guided her to the only chair in the room. Marc was careful not to dislodge his IV. He hadn’t told her before because he didn’t want to remind her, but needed to tell them what he’d learned.

“Master Sergeant Montague told me about Gino. Mama, Papa, Gino was a real hero, a brave Marine. He saved a man’s life.”

His mother rocked herself. Seeing her exhibiting such maternal emotions shook Marc to the core. She’d hardly cried when she’d heard about Gino, at least not in front of him. Something inside his chest broke, as loud as if his rib had cracked. He’d never thought of her as being vulnerable. Of course, Gino was special to her. His brother always had been her favorite one. For good reason. He’d never given Mama any trouble.

Easier to love.

Marc hunkered down beside her chair, but his legs began to shake and his lungs grew tighter and tighter. He wanted to comfort his mother, but his head grew light. When he gasped for a breath, Mama looked up, “Marco, you must get into bed!” She motioned for Papa to help her get him to the bed. They guided him to the bed. Marc collapsed against the pillows, trying to catch his breath. Damn. He hated feeling so fucking weak and helpless.

“Go get the nurse, Papa,” Mama said, lifting his feet into the bed and pulling the sheet up over him.

Between his gasps for air, Marc said: “No nurse, Mama…I’m fine…Just moved too fast…Hard to catch my breath still.”

But Papa had already left for the nurse’s station. Marc could have pointed out that there was a call button, but instead focused on catching a decent breath. When would he be able to breathe normally again?

“Here, take a sip of this.” Mama held a straw to his lips and he sucked down the ice-cold water. Even something as simple as that left him shaky.

“What’s up, Doc?”

The blonde nurse who had checked him onto the floor bounced in and quickly checked his pulse.

"Just a little dizzy and short of breath. Moved too fast."

"Well, hon, you'd better stay in bed a while and save those moves for later." She wiggled her eyebrows and he smiled. She'd been flirting with him since he'd arrived this morning.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Your parents have been camped out all night waiting for your flight to get in. You got away from them while they were out to get a bite of breakfast."

Marc's chest squeezed tight. "Yeah, we were just…catching up now."

Her smile faded as she helped him to sit up in the bed and pressed her stethoscope against the middle of his back. "Take as deep a breath as you can for me without hurting yourself."

He did the best he could, although it was anything but deep, then he felt the familiar hitch in his side.

"Good enough for now. I'm going to torture you with the spirometer later, though, so you'd better rest up. Don't want you catching pneumonia on top of that hemothorax." She helped him lie back down against the pillow. He grunted from the exertion.

"Maybe we should leave and let you get some rest," Papa said.

"I want to stay," Mama said to him, then looked down at Marc. "If you don't mind, Marco. I promise not to upset you again."

"You didn't upset me, Mama. I'm glad you're both here. But I'm afraid I won't be much company. It's all I can do to keep my eyes open."

Mama pressed her warm fingers against his forehead and drew them down over his face to close his eyelids. "Just sleep, my son. We'll be here if you need us."

The next thing Marc remembered was opening his eyes and seeing that Papa had found himself a chair and he and Mama were huddled together, their sleeping heads leaning on one another, hands clasped together.

Sweet. He couldn't picture himself growing old with a woman. He liked women too much to settle for one. Besides, you had to let your guard down if you were going to let someone that close. He didn't want to be that vulnerable to a woman ever again.

He turned away. For now, he'd like to get stronger so he could see if the blonde nurse was all talk and no action. Somehow, though, he pictured she might be the one into wielding the whip.

Still, he held onto the dream of finding that perfect little subbie to work with. Maybe he'd find her at the top sergeant's BDSM club.

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Five months later, June 2005, Naval Medical Center, San Diego, California

Adam rubbed the back of his neck, trying to ease the crick he'd gotten on the flight from Denver, as he walked down the hallway beside Doc. "Any change?"

Doc gave him a sidelong glance and shook his head. "None. He's got no fight left. Won't let anyone visit. Not even his sister. Does the bare minimum with the therapy staff. Won't wear his prosthesis."

They walked slowly down the hallway toward Orlando's room. He didn't want to walk too fast, in case Doc had any lingering effects from his collapsed lung. "Sounds like he needs a swift kick in the ass."

Marc smiled and glanced at him. "That's why I called you, sir."

Adam grinned. "Cut the sir crap. I'm retired. Besides, when I was off duty, the only person who needed to call me sir was Joni, my wife."

Marc smiled, but Adam could tell it was a pity smile. He'd opened up to Doc more than anyone else about Joni.

"I've tried to get through to him for the last couple weeks. He's fucking stubborn. But next week I start classes to train with the search-and-rescue squad. I have to get back to Denver tomorrow."

When they reached the room number they were looking for, Adam stopped and glanced over at him. "Good choice, by the way." Adam was proud of how far the kid had come from the cocky SOB who had joined his recon unit as their corpsman to someone who could lay his life on the line for someone else. "You'll make a fine SAR worker."

The younger man looked down at the floor. For a once-arrogant man, he sure didn't take compliments well. Maybe he wasn't arrogant at all, just hiding some past hurts. "Anyway, I'm glad you called me out here. Hate to see the kid discharged just to go do some damn fool thing because he hasn't gotten his head on straight yet."

"You and me both." Marc reached for the door handle to Orlando's room, and then paused. "I'll wait out here. He's sick of seeing me. Good luck."

Adam nodded, and then entered the room to find the blinds closed and the room in near darkness. No wonder the kid was depressed. He marched to the window and opened the blinds full force.

"What the fuck? I've told you to keep them closed!"

Adam turned and came around the bedside curtain to see Orlando lying there, the white sheets bunched around his waist. Shirtless. His dog tags hung against his brown chest, buried in a diamond-shaped tuft of black hair.

“You talking to me, grunt?” Adam tried not to smile as the kid practically came to attention while lying flat on his back. God, he missed having that kind of power over people. Couldn’t wait to get his club started. At least, he’d have submissive women responding to him like that again. Even better.

“Master Sergeant Montague!

“What’s this I hear about you refusing to follow orders?”

Regaining his composure, the kid slumped back against the pillows. “The orders make no sense.”

“Come again?”

“There’s no point fixing me up.”

“Since when does a grunt decide which orders to follow and which to ignore?”

Orlando turned away. A new maneuver was in order. He remembered the night he’d seen them at the fetish club in L.A., getting a screaming redhead off on the St. Andrew’s cross, right before they’d deployed. Of course, when he’d seen Doc and Orlando, he’d high-tailed it out as fast as he could. That would have been a real morale buster if the two could have held it over his head.

“So, have you ever restrained a woman on a St. Andrew’s cross?”

Orlando looked back at him. If the man could blush, he would have. “Say again?”

“I asked if you were into kinky sex—tying women up, spanking them, that sort of thing.”

Orlando seemed unsure how to answer. “I tried it once—well, maybe a few times.”

Well, hell. Adam knew about the one time, but didn’t know there’d been others. He’d just figured Doc had dragged him up there. This might be just the therapy the kid needed.

How the hell many Doms did he have in his unit, anyway? D’Alessio for sure. And he’d heard rumors Grant was a Domme, although he’d never been able to speak with her about it. Sexual harassment regs and all. Serving with a female Marine was like dancing on eggshells and trying not to break one.

Right now, Orlando was the one needing a little dominating.

“Well, I can tell you one thing, grunt. I’d rather be with a sexy redhead right now making her round ass all nice and pink than to be looking at your ugly face.” He watched as the kid’s face did flame a bit at the mention of a redhead. Adam tried not to smile at the look of surprise on the young man’s face.

Orlando got over the shock of Adam’s words pretty quickly, though, and the defenses came up yet again. Stubborn wasn’t the word for this one.

“Guess I didn’t tie mine good enough. She got away.”

Fuck. What kind of woman would dump a man while he was recovering from something like this? If you asked him, good riddance to her. Adam would find the kid as many women as he needed to get over her. But obviously, she'd sunk her claws in him pretty deeply. He wouldn't get over her very easily.

Joni would never have ditched him, no matter what had gotten blown off. That's what she'd told him—and he believed her.

"Come back to Denver with me. You can help me out with a little business I plan to start."

Orlando took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Adam could tell he was choosing his words carefully, afraid to disrespect his former top sergeant. "I don't need your charity, sir. When I leave here tomorrow, I'm just going to hole up in a motel in Solana Beach and get a good drunk-on."

Memories of his own two-week bender in Minneapolis after Joni died came back to Adam full force. He didn't want to count the number of times he'd come close to pulling the trigger with his Magnum, rather than go on without her. Would Orlando have access to a weapon? If not already, he'd have little trouble getting one.

No way was he letting this kid leave here alone.

"It's a BDSM and fetish club."

*

Damián wondered if he'd heard the man right? "Pardon, sir?"

"You heard me. I'm starting a kink club—bondage, domination, discipline, SM, fetish, any kind of kink you want to get on. Doc's joining me, but we can always use another good Dom."

Damn. Damián felt his dick going into a full salute just thinking about it. First hard-on since before the grenade blast. "I'm no Dom. I'm not interested."

"The hell you aren't." Montague grinned, and then directed his attention to the tenting of the sheets.

Damián adjusted the sheets to hide his stiffy, and then slid his leg out to reveal his bare grotesque stump. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm missing a foot."

"Well, last time I checked, most of the ladies at BDSM clubs are more interested in a firm hand and a stiff cock. You still seem to have both of those in your inventory. Sure, there may be some chicks with a foot fetish, but you still have a good one, don't you?"

Damián was speechless.

How could he get the master sergeant to see he wasn't good for anything anymore? Still, even though his former Top was out of uniform, wearing his

Marine t-shirt and blue jeans, Damián couldn't just out-and-out tell him no. He'd spent more than a year under the man's command.

"I'm supposed to continue outpatient therapy for the prosthesis."

"Denver's got an amputee center for vets." The man got more serious. "But I'll damned well make sure you do as you're told. You won't be pissing around the way you've been doing out here."

Damián had only planned as far ahead as tomorrow—with a couple bottles of tequila and a pistol. That's all he'd thought about for weeks. Months. So, why did the thought of starting over far away from all the memories of Southern California appeal to him so damned much? He sure had nothing to lose, certainly no more than if he stayed here.

"Look, sir…"

"Cut the sir crap. I'm retired. Call me Adam."

"I appreciate the offer, but…"

"Sure, there'll be plenty of butts for you to redden once we get you trained and open up the club."

Damián knew his former Top was being deliberately dense, because the man wasn't stupid. No way. He threw his arms up in exasperation. "Fine! I'll go with you!"

The older man smiled. "I knew you would. I've booked our flights back with Doc tomorrow afternoon. You just do whatever they tell you between now and tomorrow."

*

Six months later, December 2005, Denver, Colorado

"*Madre de Dios! No! No! No!*"

Fuck. Another nightmare. Adam tossed back the sheet, jumped up, and ran across the hallway into Damián's room. The kid had been plagued with these fucking nightmares for months, just about every night. Adam went to the bedside and laid his hand on Damián's shoulder. He knew from experience any kind of pressure on the kid's chest would trigger a PTSD response.

"Damián, it's Adam. You're dreaming. Wake up!" The boy's arms thrashed in the air like a rattlesnake on the attack and one blow caught Adam on the cheekbone before he could block the punch. Adam winced. The kid had been working on his upper-body strength. Judging by that blow, he'd say Damián was getting back to his pre-injury conditioning.

"*Sarge! Don't you fucking die on me!*"

Adam knew what the kid was reliving, after hearing how Miller had bled out lying on Damián's chest. He couldn't imagine what the kid had gone through

when he'd realized that. Grant said Damián hadn't been unconscious at first. He'd seen Miller's brains….

Adam needed to bring him back to reality before the kid hurt himself. Using his former top sergeant's voice, he tried again. "Orlando! Wake up! That's a fucking order, grunt!"

Damián's body stiffened. He stopped thrashing and Adam finally was able to grab and hold Damián's wrists still against the pillow at the sides of his head. He opened his eyes, his gaze darting around as if waiting for more incoming. His breathing was shallow and rapid as if he'd just climbed Mt. Evans on foot.

"You're okay, Damián. You're safe. You're in your own bed…in Denver." Adam kept up a litany of calming statements, waiting for the crazed look to leave the kid's eyes. Damián looked around as his pupils adjusted to the darkness. "It was just a bad dream."

The young man's eyes cleared. "Fucking nightmare." He continued to breathe rapidly.

"Yeah, it was."

"You can let me go. I won't punch you."

"Again, you mean?"

"Aw, shit. I did it again?"

Adam smiled. "Barely stung me. I'd like to see the day when a young pup like you can get the better of me."

"Why do you keep putting up with my shit? You haven't had a decent night's sleep in six months."

"Sleep's overrated. I've been a Marine for more than twenty years. My body doesn't need much sleep to function."

"You've had to put your club opening on hold, too. I'm costing you money."

Adam stood up to assume his maximum intimidation stance. He placed his fists on his hips, his elbows at a ninety-degree angle, and tightened the muscles of his bare chest. "Now hear this. We're Marines. We look out for each other—on and off the battlefield. Until you're ready, the fucking club can wait."

Damián closed his eyes, crooked his arm, and draped it over his eyes.

"You aren't going to get rid of me just because you can't see me." Adam sat on the edge of the bed. "Now, tell me about the dream."

Damián's therapist said the more he talked about the experirence, the less power it would have over him. Joni had done that with him while he was on his medical leave recovering from the Afghan ambush. She'd held him, cried for him, and just let him talk until he was all talked out.

If Damián kept talking, more details might come out, especially the ones he was afraid to admit even to himself. Adam talked him down from the nightmares

every time. Just in the last month, he'd gone from nightmares two or three times a night to only once a night. Progress.

"The same one. Grenade goes off. Sarge blocked the blast for me, but wound up…" Damián stopped rattling off the usual details, but his breathing became shallow and rapid again.

"Deep breath. Now!"

Damián responded, taking several deep breaths actually. "Should have been me."

Adam knew guilt had been eating at the kid all along. Hell, he knew that feeling firsthand. No amount of therapy would help either of them lose that. They'd survived while others had not.

"You'd have done the same thing if you were in Miller's place. Hell, Grant and Wilson said you were trying to protect them. Stop blaming yourself for what some fucking insurgent is responsible for."

Damián lowered his arm and looked Adam in the face. His body began to shake, almost imperceptibly at first, then harder. Adam rubbed the scar on the back of his neck.

"I froze." The words came out in a whisper. Tears streamed unheeded down the sides of Damián's face.

Fucking breakthrough. This was the first time Damián had admitted to freezing. The kid's pain tore Adam's guts out. After what he'd watched him go through the past several months, he'd thought they'd never get at what was eating him. He never wanted to give the kid a hug more than he did now.

Where the fuck did that come from? He didn't need to baby him.

"Tell me what happened." Adam started to reach out and squeeze his arm in support, but backed off. Touching him might interrupt this confession of sorts. He needed to let him talk, release some of his demons.

Damián turned his head away and pulled his legs up, the right knee tenting under the sheet a few inches lower than the left because of the amputation. Lost in the memories, he remained silent for a moment. Then he groaned in anguish. "I saw the grenade first. I just stared at it. Oh, God!" He cried out and Adam couldn't help but reach for his hand, which Damián grabbed onto with a death grip. "I just fucking stared. I looked at the others. They didn't see it! But I couldn't move for like a minute."

"Just seemed like a minute. Grenades go off in seconds. You've just slowed the motion down in your head." Adam sure could relate to that. He'd had those same slow-motion memories from the ambush in Kandahar. Watching and not being able to protect or save his men.

Damián stared at the ceiling with unseeing eyes. “By the time I screamed for them to take cover, there wasn’t enough time. Grant was talking with Wilson. She didn’t fucking know. I nudged Sarge and we both moved at the same time. I thought he’d moved fast enough, but I didn’t make sure. I went after the others. When I turned back, Sarge was right behind me, but too close to…” His body stiffened and he squeezed his eyes shut, as though feeling the impact of the explosion again.

Damián pulled his hand away and hugged himself, squeezing his eyes shut. Adam couldn’t stand it anymore. He pulled him up to sit, wrapped his arms around him, and held him tightly. The kid began shaking harder, as if in shock.

*

Smothered. Even though he wasn’t lying down, he still felt the crushing weight against his chest. Sarge. He struggled to get the body off him.

“It’s me. Adam. You’re safe, Damián.”

Not Sarge. Adam.

“You did everything you could. It’s not your fault.”

“Oh, God. I tried. I fucking tried. I couldn’t…” He wrapped his arms around Adam and held onto the man who had become his lifeline. Surprisingly, the smothering feeling receded a bit.

“You did everything right. You couldn’t save everyone. No one could.”

“Why? Why’d he have to die? Why not me?”

Adam continued to just hold him, but Damián noticed that his former Top’s heart was pounding hard against his chest. When he spoke, Adam’s voice had become raspy. “That’s above my pay grade—and a question I’ve asked myself a million times, too. But you have to quit blaming yourself.”

Easier said than done.

“I will, if you will.” But Damián knew they’d both probably go to their graves asking themselves the same question.

Adam cleared his throat. “What you have to do is find something or someone that will make your surviving worthwhile. Find a cause that moves you. Find a woman who needs you. Just fucking find something you can do to make the world a better place for at least one other person.”

Damián held on tighter. He knew tears were falling onto Adam’s chest, but didn’t want to ease away and reveal the evidence. The man had been like a father to him the past six months, taking care of him day and night. Making sure he did his PT exercises. Forcing him to wear the god-damned prosthesis until finally it stopped rubbing his stump raw.

The man had had no fucking life as a result. Adam should have been enjoying retirement, not babysitting him. Why hadn’t he just left Damián in San

Diego to finish off what the grenade had started? How could Damián ever repay him for the sacrifices he'd made?

Puckered skin? Damián's hands rested against what felt like puckered skin on Adam's back. *What the fuck?* He pulled back and felt Adam's body go stiff.

Damián looked him in the eye. "Turn around."

"You don't give me orders, son."

"What happened?"

"It was a long time ago. Kandahar. Ambush. I took some shrapnel to the back."

While he rattled off the cold, hard facts in a non-emotional way, Damián knew from the pain reflected in Adam's eyes that the man must have battled his own demons. From where Damián's hands explored, half the man's back must be riddled with shrapnel wounds. The master sergeant had been through just as much as Damián had.

How had he stayed so strong, so normal, so sane?

Was Damián his cause, to help him handle his own survivor guilt?

Maybe there was hope for Damián yet. He needed to quit feeling sorry for himself and find some worthwhile cause to dedicate himself to.

But what?

Section Five
The Masters at Arms Club

Three months ago

Adam would be glad to get this meeting over. Damián wanted to add live music to the club. They'd finally opened in 2008 and were doing well, so they could afford it. Adam just didn't go in for most of that heavy-metal stuff Damián liked.

"Edgy?" Damián asked.

He looked at Damián and Marc as they searched for just the right word for the classified ad. Well, Marc seemed about as much into the conversation as Adam was. What the hell ailed that boy lately?

"I like it." *As long as it doesn't put* me *over the edge.* Adam watched as the younger man he thought of like a son scribbled that addition onto the notepad on the desk between them. "Read me what we have so far."

"'Private club. Friday & Saturday performances only. Eclectic, edgy music—heavy metal and Goth welcome. Auditions start at 3 PM Wednesday. For location and additional info…' Then the phone number and e-mail."

"Sounds good to me," Marc said. He seemed distracted this afternoon. Actually, he'd been that way for well over a year, but refused to tell Adam what was eating at him. Probably still hadn't gotten over that woman who had dumped him last year. What was her name? Pamela? He'd only brought her to the club a couple times. She seemed nice, but there wasn't much chemistry between the two other than the Dom/sub thing.

Marc hadn't talked with him about the relationship, and Adam didn't go looking to butt in. Still, he thought the younger man could benefit from some advice, if he ever asked for it. Sometimes he came across as too arrogant and manipulative to suit most women. He seemed to have some kind of wall up that always kept them in their place, but that place was never quite as close as women wanted to get.

Marc stood. "I'm sorry, but I'm pulling a night shift to help out a friend, so I'm going to have to hit the road. I trust whatever you both decide to do."

They said their goodbyes and Adam watched him leave. Maybe he'd try to have a word with him before the club opened up Friday night. With Marc's SAR work schedule, he didn't see much of him, though.

Damián, on the other hand, practically lived here and helped run the club.

“Son, you’re in charge of hiring the entertainment.” Adam wouldn’t know what young people wanted to hear if it hit him over the head. Besides, he needed to keep Damián busy so he wouldn’t dwell on things outside his control. He said the nightmares were rare now, but Adam could tell when he showed up with circles under his eyes that he’d been visited by his demons.

Being a Dom helped Damián regain some of the control he’d lost over his life, but Adam worried that he sometimes went a little too deep into SM. He knew it wasn’t the boy’s nature to inflict pain and he thought maybe he was just using SM to release his anger, rather than as an expression of his sexual nature.

Damián slid the notepad across the desk toward Adam. “If we could hire two or three acts—have a mix of styles—we can rotate them and keep things from getting stale.”

Adam pulled the notepad closer. “Sounds good. I’ll e-mail the ad to the online newspaper.”

After discussing some other business matters, mostly about ways to improve the experience at the club for members and their guests, Damián went to set up a new piece of equipment in one of the private playrooms.

Adam watched him leave his office. Damián wore his trademark black leather Harley vest and black jeans. He had long ago ditched the crutches, then his cane. He’d gotten used to walking on the prosthesis and, only when he was overtired, did he walk with a limp.

Here in Denver, Adam, Marc, and Damián had gotten to know each other as civilians and friends. Whenever he thought back to that day in Fallujah, where he’d nearly lost them both—and had lost Miller. Thank God they, at least, had managed to get the rest of the troops home alive.

And these two men had become his family. When he’d lost Joni, he hadn’t thought he’d ever feel he belonged anywhere again.

The three of them were pretty much at the service of any of the subs at Masters at Arms who needed a top. A number of bottoms came to the club solo, just wanting to have a scene with one of them. Marc was the only one who’d seen anyone seriously and that had lasted only a few months. Usually, the three of them were able to accommodate the subs, which might be why so many of them kept coming back and bringing their friends.

Damián told him about a girl in San Diego he’d dated once. Still seemed hung up on her, but he said he hadn’t been able to find her when he’d been home to visit his sister and her kids last Christmas. She must have been something to keep him thinking about her all these years.

Under Adam’s and Marc’s tutelage, Damián had become a knowledgeable and attentive Dom. Good thing, because Marc had become more and more

scarce at the club in the past year. A few months ago, Damián had taken over the training of the new unattached subs.

Even though Damián served the needs of the masochists when he wanted to get off, his gentle side seemed to come out with the more inexperienced trainees. He was very vigilant to the needs of the subs, knowing how far to push them without going beyond hard limits.

"All done," Damián said, returning to the office. "It's going to be fun trying that one out."

Adam smiled. Marc had recommended the new spanking bench. Said his SAR partner had made him one for his home playroom. He wondered when Marc had time to entertain anyone in that playroom. He didn't seem to have his heart in BDSM scening these days.

"Son, have a seat."

"Yes, sir."

"When are you going to quit that 'sir' shit? It's Adam. Hell, even Dad's better than sir. I only want to hear Sir from a subbie." He'd reminded the kid of that many times. Damián just smiled. He'd probably ignore the order this time, too.

"You're doing a great job with the trainees. The subs are raving about what an excellent trainer you are. And the doms have noticed the improvement in the subs' level of discipline, too."

"Thanks." Damián looked away. He looked serious. Then his gaze met Adam's again. "Remember how you wanted me to find a cause—something that would help me make a difference for someone else?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I think I have."

"Great! Doing what?"

"The Patriot Guard Riders. They provide motorcycle escorts for military funerals, and keep protestors far enough away they can't bother the families. I've been supporting them as a non-rider for a while now, but my Harley is just about ready down at the shop. I'd like to ride now, too, whenever the call goes out."

Adam felt a lump the size of Minnesota in his throat. As he came around the desk to sit on the edge in front of Damián, he cleared his throat before trying to speak. "I think that would be the perfect cause for you, son. I know you've worked hard restoring that hog, too."

Damián looked away, then back again. "It might mean going on rides when the club's open."

Other than the club and his work at a local Harley repair shop, this was the first thing the kid had gotten interested in since he'd moved to Denver. "To hell

with the club. Any time you need to go on a ride, go. I can get people to help out here as needed. Hell, most of our regular patrons are ex-military. They'll want to support what you're doing, too."

"Thank you, sir." He cleared his throat and surprised the hell out of Adam. "I also want to thank you for pulling me back from the edge."

Adam reached out and squeezed Damián's shoulder. "God didn't bless Joni and me with children. We lost a son…" Adam stopped until he could control the shaking in his voice before this turned into an all-out bawl-fest. He still couldn't think about Joni or their stillborn baby boy without regret and pain. "I couldn't have asked for a better son. I'm proud of you for fighting your way back."

Adam cleared his throat before continuing. "I've told you this before, but I think of you more as a son than a business partner." He felt Damián's shoulders shake with emotion. The kid had been very close to his own parents. But his father had worked himself to death trying to support their family, dying when Damián was only twelve. Adam surmised the loss of his father and the need to protect his mother and sister had played a big part in what led him into trouble with the law before he joined the Marines. Reminded him a lot of Adam's own misguided youth and reasons for joining the Corps.

But the Marines had turned Damián into a fine young man. One anyone would be proud to call son. Adam certainly would continue to think of him as his son until the day he died. Even if Damián wasn't looking for a replacement dad.

*

Would the ache ever go away?

Karla plucked a tissue from the box in her lap and stared at Ian's photo lying beside her on the burgundy-velvet antique settee. Every day for the past two months, she'd fought to accept and understand Ian's death. *Fail*. She'd lost the ability to function on a day-to-day basis. Last night, she'd been fired from the club.

Escape. She looked around her Soho loft, the place where she'd lived since college. Five of her college roommate's oil paintings dominated one wall; their vibrant colors usually able to cheer her up. Not tonight.

She should be singing at the club. Ian had come to hear her perform whenever he was in the city. With the bright lights blinding her up on stage these past two months, she'd often imagined him sitting there in the front row, smiling up at her. But when the show was over, she realized he hadn't been there. Would never be there again. Then last night, she hadn't even been able to walk onto the stage as she was hit with a full-blown panic attack.

She'd never frozen like that.

Last week, her contract with the record label had fallen through. She just couldn't concentrate long enough to write anything new. With her career sufficiently down the tubes, she needed to get away from the city and regroup. But where could she go?

Her parents kept trying to talk her into moving back home. She knew they needed her, but being in the house where she'd grown up with Ian was too painful. Every time she passed his room or stared at the empty chair at the table, she'd think of him. Her chest tightened as tears welled in her eyes. No, she couldn't move back there.

Maybe a visit to her college roommate's mountain cabin would help. She usually showed up at Cassie's in the fall when the aspens were so beautiful. Her gaze moved to the painting of a stand of the trees with their yellow-gold leaves nearly quaking against the off-white bark. Karla remembered being with Cassie last year as she created the painting.

The artwork complemented Karla's mix-and-match style furniture. The wooden dining table with funky chairs of aspen yellow, azure blue, and crimson. The bar with its vinyl-covered red, green, and blue lunch counter stools. No one could accuse Karla of being dull when it came to colors. Well, except for her wardrobe.

And yet, the joy she usually felt here was gone. Even the few walls of the loft were closing in on her. She looked at the bookshelf where Adam's framed photo in his dress blues had been displayed proudly beside Ian's portrait ever since she'd moved into the loft.

Adam, I need you.

Few days passed since that Thanksgiving weekend without some thought of Adam. Her heart still ached with images of his kneeling down before her in the bus station's ladies room as she cleaned up the wounds he'd received trying to protect her from harm. Memories of his arms around her had infused her with the strength and courage to return home and face her parents.

The sight of him half naked in her parents' kitchen in the wee hours of that Thanksgiving Day had made an indelible mark on an impressionable, young girl's mind. The corner of her mouth lifted in a half smile. No man had ever measured up to Adam; not that she'd really seen many men without their shirts. She'd focused solely on building her career.

And now that was gone. Tears welled in her eyes.

The few letters he'd managed to write while deployed also were among her most prized possessions, along with the printouts of Ian's e-mails. Neither was a prolific correspondent, but she understood how busy they were. But after Adam

retired from the Marines, he'd kept in touch with a letter every month. In recent years, he'd even e-mailed her. But she preferred the letters. More personal.

Adam had surprised her when he told her how much he loved listening to the music she'd sent him while he was in Fallujah. She'd hoped to send him a copy of the professionally mastered CD of her Gothic rock love songs. But that wasn't going to happen now.

Adam had always sent her a bouquet of roses dyed neon pink for her birthday, reminding her of that awful hair color she'd had when she met him. She smiled. He always seemed to have a genuine interest in what she was doing and wanted to make sure she was okay. He'd check to see if she needed anything. Offer advice whenever she'd asked on matters small or large.

Mostly small matters, she realized now. She hadn't been able to tell him about Ian.

Guilt plagued her for not responding to his last two letters. Karla couldn't find the words to tell him about Ian's accident. Tears stung her eyes again. She grabbed a tissue and blew her nose.

Go to Adam. He can help.

Karla needed Adam more than she'd ever needed anyone before. With nothing left to hold here her in New York, she picked up the phone and booked a red-eye flight to Denver. She'd find some small club where she could sing that wouldn't be as demanding as the one in Soho. Just enough to help pay the bills while she licked her wounds and healed.

Karla pulled out her suitcases and started packing. She'd keep the loft for now, until she knew what she'd do. Maybe she could sublet it to a friend. Only a few possessions would go with her, though. The two bundles of letters. Her performance costumes. Copies of the CD she recorded last year. Everyday clothes.

She placed Ian and Adam's framed photos safely inside her carry-on bag, wrapped in one of the long gothic dresses she'd wear for auditions and, she hoped, performances. No way would she risk losing their photos if something happened to her luggage. Three years of living in the loft and everything that meant something to her, except for Cassie's paintings, fit neatly into two suitcases and a carry-on.

She made out a check to the landlady for two-months' rent to hold the apartment, just in case things didn't work out in Denver. Then she called a cab and closed the door on her independent life in New York City.

Karla hoped she'd be able to find Adam once she got to Denver. She only knew his e-mail address and his Post Office box number. She'd reply to his last e-mail once she got settled in Denver.

*

Damián listened as the metal band's lead singer spewed his gritty lyrics. He wasn't sure the band was quite what the club needed. Not that any of the others he'd heard audition this afternoon were any better.

His mind wandered back to his talk with Adam last week. Adam had pulled his bacon out of the fire in San Diego back in 2005, when Damián had been just a day or so away from putting an end to his sorry life.

Plain and simple—Adam saved his life.

Damián cleared his throat, then noticed that the offensive music had stopped. He looked up at the stage and saw the lead singer waiting for a response from him. When had they finished playing?

"Thank you. We'll be in touch soon." The rote response rolled off his tongue after an afternoon of horrendous auditions. As the band packed up its equipment, he looked down at his appointment sheet. He had a few minutes before the next audition.

Since coming to Denver, he'd managed to put memories of Savannah, and all the pain she'd caused, behind him. When he was awake, at least. She still intruded on his dreams, but at least she was a better night visitor than the images from Fallujah.

Damián still couldn't believe he was a Dom now. He even found himself enjoying some of the scenes with the submissives he was training. But he had to rein in the beast in those scenes, for fear of hurting someone—well, someone who didn't want to be hurt, anyway. There were some nights he just had to decline a scene because he knew the rage was too close to the surface.

Of course, being the resident sadist, all the masochists found their way to him at some point. Even with them, he only indulged if he knew he could keep himself from going too far. Nothing compared to the euphoric high he got when he was in hyper-vigilant Dom space, tuned into the sub's every breath, every gasp, every scream.

But, since he'd started working with the submissives in training, he'd learned he still knew how to please a woman without inflicting severe pain. While it didn't do anything for him sexually, he'd long ago learned that sometimes it wasn't about him.

Working at the club also gave him plenty of time to pursue the other things he loved, too. He'd been hired at a local Harley shop several years ago and finally had managed to fully restore his own classic. He never felt freer than when he was on his hog. When the physical therapists had told him he'd be able to ride again, they'd given him the motivation he needed to get his ass in gear and do what they told him to do.

He heard the door open behind him and turned to watch as a tall, slender young woman approached. He hoped she could hold his attention better than the last performers had.

“Come in, Miss…” he looked back down at his sheet, “Paxton. I’ll give you a few minutes to get ready. If you have a background disc, just put it in the sound system over there.”

Damián watched her prepare. Her long, wavy hair hung loose to her waist and she wore a medieval-looking dress with pointed sleeves. Her low-cut front exposed the inner sides of her breasts. No bra. Interesting look, although he’d like to see even more skin if she performed in the club.

Hell, at this point, he just hoped she could sing. So far, they hadn’t found anyone he’d want to hire. He looked back at her e-mailed resume. Her background indicated she was way overqualified. What was a Manhattan club singer doing in a small weekend private club like this one? Maybe she was like him, just needing a new start. Or maybe she’d lied on her resume.

When he glanced up at her again, he watched her bite her lower lip. Her eyes widened as she surveyed the room—homing in on the unconventional furniture, complete with chains and manacles. Hadn’t she understood what the ad in the alternative paper meant by a private club? If she thought the room looked wild now, she’d never make it through a night of debauchery this weekend.

Then she noticed him watching her. He continued to stare until she became uncomfortable and looked down at the floor. Shy? Or submissive?

It would be interesting finding out. Interesting indeed.

*

Karla nibbled at the inside of her lower lip. What kind of club was this? She’d been so rushed to request an audition when she saw the online ad while waiting for her flight at LaGuardia. She really hadn’t paid much attention to the reply other than to get the address and time right. With her flight delayed, she’d changed into her costume in-flight, which had been an interesting feat. She’d barely arrived in time for the audition.

Karla looked around the room. She’d never seen anything like this place. A private club. For what? Or did she want to know? There was a full bar and stage area, right in the middle of someone’s house. And the furniture! A few tables and chairs were scattered about, but what caught her attention were a number of ottomans positioned around the stage—each with manacles and chains attached to them. Talk about a captive audience.

A center pole in the middle of the house's great room sported several thick eye bolts—and more chains and cuffs of varying heights spaced at regular intervals. Along the wall were any number of implements of torture whose purposes she didn't even want to think about.

She cast nervous glances at the Hispanic man in the Harley-Davidson vest sitting at a table between the center post and the bar. While he studied her paperwork, she noticed that his shoulder-length hair was pulled into a ponytail. His moustache and goatee gave him the look of a—well, if she needed to put a word to it—"sadist." Or what she'd imagine a sadist would look like.

Then he looked up at her and his black eyes bore through her, causing her stomach to drop with a ka-thunk. Unsettling. No longer able to maintain eye contact, she looked down at the floor. Maybe she should run while she still had the chance.

No. She needed this job. She looked up again, but her eyes gravitated to the center post first. Her stomach quivered, sending a jolt to her clit.

Oh, my!

"Miss Paxton?" Her attention returned to the intimidating man. When he stood, she realized how tall he was. Almost as tall as she remembered Adam being, although even Adam probably wasn't as tall as she remembered. She was only about five-six when they'd met. Everyone looked tall to her then.

"Are you ready?" His voice was stern. No smile. Would this man be her boss? Would she be able to work with someone who put her nerves on edge like he did?

Well, it's not like you have a lot of options. The market for Goth singers was pretty small, especially in an isolated city like Denver.

"Y-yes." She drew her shoulders back. Why did she feel she should bow down before him? Lord, he intimidated her.

"I'm Damián Orlando, one of the owners of the club. Just call me Master Damián."

Her hand shook as she adjusted the microphone to her height. *Master* Damián? What had she gotten herself into this time?

"Nice to meet you, sir."

He smiled as if satisfied with her response. Why did the thought of pleasing him seem so important to her? "Begin whenever you're ready."

She walked over to the sound equipment and queued up her music. When she returned to the mic, his intense gaze sent butterflies into frenzied flight inside her stomach. *Shoot!* She missed her queue.

"I'm sorry. May I start over?"

"Certainly."

Come on, Karla. You need this job. Don't blow it.

She went back to the CD player to start Track One again. *Deep breath*. She ran her clammy hands against the brocade dress covering her thighs, then returned to the microphone center stage. Unable to sing while he stared at her with that all-consuming gaze, she closed her eyes and felt the music flow through her.

For you, Ian. She almost felt as if Ian was watching over her. Not the sadist club owner in front of her, but her brother.

Then she sang Tarja's *I Walk Alone*, as if she really could bring Ian back.

*

Adam closed the checkbook and crossed to his filing cabinet to lock it away. Aerosmith's *I Don't Want to Miss a Thing* blared from the speakers. He'd been trying to drown out the noise from the auditions, but that song put him even more on edge. Damn. One of Joni's favorites. She'd play it almost every night he was home on leave.

They said time would heal the pain of her loss. Nine years had only managed to dull it. Rather than the sharp knife point he used to feel jabbing into his heart, the pain now felt more like his heart being squeezed in a vise.

God, I still miss you, Joni.

A particularly discordant note from the latest audition brought him back to the present. He hoped he hadn't made a big mistake with this whole live music thing. He'd barely been able to hear himself think while trying to concentrate on his bookwork. How the hell would he be able to focus on his sub during Dom/sub demonstrations with that racket in the background?

Of course, there were the private rooms, but he liked to do demonstrations in the great room for some of the newer Doms. He usually worked with Grant as his sub. She'd shown up at the club six months ago, after hearing about it from Damián. She usually topped submissive women and men—but she liked to switch things up with her former master sergeant. Unfortunately, she wasn't submissive so much as subordinate. Not the same as what he'd shared with Joni, but he didn't expect to find that kind of woman again.

Now that his accounting was done and the bills paid for another week, he opened the door to his office and went back to the desk to check his e-mail account. If anyone had told him while he was in the Corps he'd become a keyboard jockey in retirement, at his laptop several times a day to keep his business records up to date or to cruise the Internet, he'd have shot them for a fool.

During a lull between his classic-rock station's tunes, new music wafted through the door from one of the acts auditioning in the bar. Nice. A woman's

voice. He actually understood the words. For some odd reason, thoughts of Karla Paxton came to mind. He still pictured her as a pink-haired Goth, although she'd sworn to him in her letters that had just been a rebellious teenage phase.

Karla had written to him as promised since he'd said goodbye to her at the airport that Thanksgiving weekend. She'd often send something she'd made, including the most incredible chocolate-peanut butter brownies he'd ever eaten. He felt guilty, as though that thought was disloyal to Joni. She'd never been too interested in cooking or baking.

Then, during Karla's senior year in high school, he'd received an MP3 player with a few songs saved on it that she'd recorded. Nearly every night in Fallujah, he'd lain awake in his rack and listened to her sweet voice through his earphones. She'd kept him sane, especially after the disaster there, reminding him there still was innocence and beauty left in this fucked-up world. Somewhere.

He'd been so proud of her when she went on to complete a music degree at Columbia. Thank God she'd found a safe way to get to New York without having to pull another runaway stunt.

He drew his brows together. Why hadn't she replied to his last two letters and numerous e-mails? That wasn't like her. If they didn't both keep such crazy hours, he'd have called to check up on her. Adam decided if he didn't hear something this week, he'd make sure she was all right. He worried about her singing late at night at that club in Manhattan. Although she said she'd taken martial-arts classes after her encounter with Dickwad and friends in the Chicago bus station, she was still a tiny little thing.

The voice of the woman in the great room called to him like a siren's song. The quivering lilt reminded him so much of Karla's voice on her MP3, but then the woman auditioning belted out the chorus in a well-trained adult's voice. She stirred something in Adam. He picked up the remote and muted the stereo.

"*I walk alone. Every step I take, I walk alone.*"

Damn. Adam stood up, drawn toward the open doorway where he could hear her better. His hand drew instinctively to the scar on his neck. What the fuck? He forced his hand back down to his side.

The hallway to the great room wasn't that long and before he knew he'd even moved, he found himself standing at the side of the stage. The woman's thick, black curls hung in disarray over her shoulders and back. She looked as if she'd just tumbled out of bed. His cock throbbed at the thought of holding her beneath him by fists full of her gorgeous hair as he buried himself deep inside her.

Jesus. What's gotten into you, old man? She's a little young for you, isn't she? Okay, a lot young.

Still, unable to take his eyes off her, he circled around behind the table where Damián sat. He hadn't had a gut-wrenching response to a woman, well, since Joni. Sure, he'd participated with Grant in demonstrations for various scenes and techniques and occasionally took a submissive under his wing until she hooked up with her own Dom. But that was merely physical. No emotional attachments. Exactly as he planned to keep it. No one would ever stir his interest in being a committed Dom the way Joni had.

"*Go back to sleep forever.*"

He stopped and stood in front of her, about ten feet away from the stage. Eyes closed, tears spilling down her cheeks. His chest tightened. He fought the urge to go up on the stage to pull her into his arms to comfort her.

Little girl lost.

A distant memory sent his hand to massage that spot on his neck again.

"*No one can help you.*"

Tall, probably five-ten. She looked a little gaunt. Dark half-moon circles curved below her eyes. They didn't look like make-up, although it was hard to tell with a Goth. Her breasts filled out the dress nicely, her curves exposed. Lovely breasts he wanted to press his lips against. Her hips flared beautifully under the loose dress, as well. At least she wasn't gaunt all over.

If they hired her, she'd definitely need to wear something a little more provocative than this Maid Marian costume.

He tried not to think about removing the dress to expose her body to his gaze. But his mind had other ideas. He imagined taking her nipple between his teeth and tugging at it. With her gaze cast downward, much of her face hidden by her hair, he found himself wanting to push the curls away from her face so he could look into her eyes.

When the song ended, she drew several deep breaths, her breasts rising and falling gently.

"Well done, Miss Paxton," Damián said.

No. Couldn't be. No fucking way!

As if in slow motion, Adam watched her brush away the tears and raise her gaze to Damián's. She smiled. Just as he remembered, except that her blue eyes didn't sparkle anymore. Then her gaze shifted as she noticed Adam for the first time. Her smile faded. What little color she had in her face drained away.

"Adam?"

When she swayed on her feet, he rushed to the stage and caught her in his arms before she collapsed. His heart pounded. Had she been sick? Was that why she'd lost so much weight? Adam felt a vise of a different kind around his heart as he lifted her and carried her to the loveseat near the windows. He laid her

down, propping her head and upper back against the armrest and pillows there. Kneeling beside her, her framed her face with his hands, hoping to infuse some of his warmth into her. Her face was so cold.

He reached for an aftercare subbie blanket from the basket beside the loveseat and wrapped her in it. Her body began to tremble.

"Adam? How did you know I would be here?"

"I didn't." When she looked even more confused, he added. "You're in my club."

Her eyes widened and skittered from the chaining post in the center of the room to the manacled ottomans. *Good thing she couldn't see the theme rooms*. She shouldn't be in a place like this. Damn. Shifting from horny perv to paternalistic thoughts did nothing to shrink the raging hard-on in his jeans.

"So, I gather you two have met."

Adam had forgotten about Damián. When he turned to look up, his surrogate son held out a bottle of water. Adam noted a bit of disappointment in the younger man's face, but didn't want to think about Damián taking Karla under his thumb.

Mine.

Where the hell had that thought come from? Karla was just a kid. Hell, he was old enough to be her father, as he'd told her all those years ago when she'd professed her love. Adam took the bottle, then opened and handed it to Karla. "Yes. A very long time ago."

"He was my knight in shining armor." Adam didn't appreciate the look of hero-worship on her face. He'd never been anybody's hero and didn't plan to start now.

"I did what anyone would have done." She quirked the corner of her mouth, as if to say "*bullshit.*" No, she wouldn't use language like that.

When her full lips wrapped around the bottle, he tried not to think about them wrapped around anything other than the lip of that damned bottle. Still, his other head ignored his paternal censors. What in the hell was he going to do? No way could he hire her and have her so near while he entertained perverted thoughts about her.

"When can you start, Miss Paxton?" Damián's words felt like a sucker punch to his solar plexus.

Shit.

"Wait here," Adam said to Karla. Then he stood and turned to Damián. "I need to have a word with you." He knew Damián followed him to the bar without having to look, then turned to face him. "She's not working here."

"What?"

“She doesn’t belong in a place like this.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? This is a decent club compared to most. Besides, she has a great voice. We need her. The other acts were crap. She’s the last one on my list.” Adam remained silent and Damián rattled off the list of reasons they should hire her. The younger man then pulled out his trump card. “You gave me hiring authority. I’m hiring Karla.”

What the fuck am I going to do now?

“Who the hell *is* she?”

Adam shook his head, then ran his hand through his hair. He wouldn’t go back on his word to Damián. Maybe he could just make himself scarce and avoid her. *Just how the fuck do you plan to do that? This is your god-damned club.*

Adam sighed. “Forget what I said. Make sure she’s okay. Then send her to my office to fill out the paperwork.” He needed to get his dick under control, even if he couldn’t control anything else anymore. Not trusting himself to go anywhere near her, he escaped to his office.

Good God, what the hell are You doing sending her here?

Then again, maybe it wasn’t God’s fault. Maybe he was being punished for all the things he’d done wrong in his life.

*

Adam doesn’t want you here.

Karla couldn’t mistake how quickly Adam had run away from her. She’d made a royal mistake coming to Denver. Tears stung her eyes as she sat up on the loveseat, swinging her legs to the floor and pushing the blanket away. At the back of her mind she wondered why you would have blankets in a nightclub. Well, she was in Denver. Maybe it got cold here at night.

She wiped her eyes, trying to compose herself before having to face either of them again. A facial tissue dangled in front of her field of vision. She looked up to find Master Damián holding the tissue out to her. For someone who looked like a sadist, he sure had a gentle side to him. Somehow gentle sadist just didn’t go together.

She accepted the tissue and dabbed at her eyes. Good thing she hadn’t worn full stage makeup. She’d look like a raccoon right now. Just as she had when she’d cried for Adam in the Chicago bus station all those years ago.

“Sorry. I’m just really tired. I only arrived from New York early this morning.”

“Well, the club won’t be open again until Friday night. Your first set will be at seven o’clock. Get some rest between now and then.”

“You mean, he wants to hire me?”

"*I* am hiring you, Karla. But Master Adam asked me to send you to his office to fill out the paperwork so we can get you on the payroll PDQ."

Master Adam. The title caused warmth to spread into her stomach, then lower. She realized she didn't really know much about Adam at all. How had he lived this separate life and not even intimated at such in his letters?

Because he still thinks you're a kid.

Master Damián extended a hand and helped her to her feet. His grip was firm, warm. When she swayed, he steadied her by holding her elbows with both hands.

She wished Adam's hands were holding her. Another tear ran down her cheek. He obviously wanted to have nothing to do with her. How could she stay here?

How could she leave?

"Could you point me in the right direction?"

"Better yet, I'll take you."

"Is it okay if I leave my bags in the entryway for now?"

"Sure. They'll be safe there. I'll be locking up after I take you to Master Adam's office."

As they started toward the hallway where Adam had disappeared, Master Damián discussed what was expected of her as far as a new wardrobe.

Oh, dear. "I'm sorry, but I…I don't have any money for new clothes yet. Would it be okay if I wore my dresses from the Soho club until I get a couple paychecks under my belt?"

"Talk to Master Adam. He'll probably advance you some money for appropriate clothing. Where are you staying?"

She bit her lower lip. "I'm going to find a motel when I leave here."

"I think we can do better than that."

Karla wasn't sure what he meant, but by then they'd arrived at Adam's office. She preceded Damián into the office and saw Adam seated at a large walnut desk, staring intently at some paperwork before him. He dominated the room, which was decorated in dark wood and black leather. When she hesitated, Master Damián took her elbow and led her to one of the leather chairs in front of the desk. But she chose to remain standing. Looking down at Adam gave her a sense of power she needed to feel right now. She wouldn't stay if he didn't want her here.

"Sir, Karla's just gotten to town and doesn't have a place to stay. She'll need one of the rooms upstairs."

Sir. Had Master Damián served with Adam in the Marines? He certainly had the body and stature of a Marine. Then Karla noticed Adam's hand had tightened

on the pen he held.

Adam doesn't want you here.

She blinked rapidly and swallowed past the lump in her throat. *Don't let him see you cry.* Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and rose to her full height. She still only reached to Master Damián's chin. The man intimidated the hell out of her, but she needed to stand up for herself and stop being led around by him as if she were a puppy.

"That won't be necessary. I'm staying at a motel."

Adam looked up at her, his piercing green eyes short-circuiting her bravado. "Nonsense. You'll stay here." His gaze sent a thrill down her spine at the same time as it caused her heart to come to a halt. She'd yearned to see Adam again for so long. Now that she was here, she wasn't sure if she wanted to run to his arms, or run out the door.

To Damián, he said, "Take her things to the guest room on the east end of the house."

Master Damián chuckled. She wondered what was so funny, but couldn't ask. What had she gotten herself into? Live here with Adam? That was just wrong on so many levels. She just wanted to crawl back to New York and forget about this whole hare-brained idea. When Master Damián left, she remained standing as Adam stared up at her as if he didn't have a clue how to deal with her.

"I was worried about you." His voice came out in a husky whisper that washed over her as if he'd gently stroked a finger down her bare arm.

Of all the things she thought she'd hear him say after the scene in the bar room, that was the last she expected. Karla blinked away more tears, her bravado evaporating quickly. She'd expected him to continue to be all businesslike and distant, not so…caring.

Her tearfulness reminded her of the time she'd wrecked the family car when she was eighteen. She'd been fine until her dad had asked if she were okay.

"Are you okay?" Adam asked, concern in his voice.

The same question. Now all the emotions she'd tried to bury the last two months resurfaced. She began shaking, unable to form a coherent response. She steadied herself with a hand against the back of the chair. Tears blurred her vision. Then she felt Adam's strong arms surrounding her, holding her up.

Safe. Adam.

She took in a ragged gasp of air, then a wrenching sob poured from deep inside her chest.

"Shhhh. It's going to be okay." He turned her around and pressed her against his rock-hard chest and his hands stroked her hair. She felt his heart beating

against her cheek as she wrapped her arms around his back, holding on as if he were a lifeline. She wept grief-stricken tears mixed with tears of joy to be holding Adam once again.

She'd tried for two months to remain strong for her parents' sakes at the funeral and to make sure everything was beautiful for Ian's funeral. Then she'd tried to continue to tamp down her emotions and grief so she could return to New York and function again.

Fail.

"What's happened, Karla?

She shook her head, not wanting to put into words what she still didn't want to acknowledge. The tears she couldn't dam up any longer spilled onto his chest. *Oh, no!* She pulled away and saw the blackened spots on his white shirt.

She reached out to touch the stains as more tears spilled. "I'm sorry, Adam."

He cupped her cheek in his hands and tilted her head back until she saw his face swimming before her eyes. "It's just a f…god-damned shirt. Karla. Tell me what's wrong. Come. Sit with me."

He led her over to a black leather loveseat she hadn't noticed before. He sat down and, rather than have her sit beside him, pulled her onto his lap. She'd fantasized about being held by him like this, but he was her new boss, wasn't he? Totally inappropriate.

Adam. Her friend. He knew everything about her. Over the years, in her letters, she'd shared more with him than she had with Ian, her parents, or her girlfriends.

He'd saved her once. She so needed saving again. But she was too broken this time for anyone to save her.

*

Adam hadn't felt this helpless since he'd watched Joni dying, except maybe for Fallujah and its aftermath. Something tragic had happened to Karla. He needed to know what, so he could make it better. Nothing rotted his gut more than feeling so fucking helpless.

"Are your parents all right?"

She nodded, but kept her gaze on her lap. Thank God. Jenny and Carl had taken him in that Thanksgiving morning and treated him like, well, a brother. He'd feared perhaps something had happened to one of them.

Then, was it Ian? No, her brother's deployment had ended a while back. Adam knew he'd made it home safely from Iraq. But they were redeploying units so fast these days. Had he gotten hurt?

"Ian?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and wrapped her arms over her stomach, holding herself as she tried to curl over into a ball as if to contain the pain. She nodded her head, and a mournful sob escaped her lips.

Oh, God no. Not her brother.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. He held her as she sobbed. She adored her older brother more than anyone in the world. He'd seen that in her letters as she'd bragged about his commendations and activities.

"Tell me what happened."

He didn't want to hear the words, but knew she needed to speak them, just as talking about his nightmares had helped Damián. Again, she shook her head. The scent of her citrus-y shampoo drifted to his nose. Adam brought his hand up and held her head closer to his chest. He stroked her face. Her hair. Her face. Her skin. So soft. She felt so right in his arms—and that was so fucking wrong.

God, she was so young.

So hurting. He'd never been able to resist reaching out to help a lost soul.

"Karla, tell me what's happened to Ian."

He knew the sooner she got the story out, the sooner she'd be able to begin to function again. To heal. Whatever had happened, she'd already kept it bottled up way too long. She gasped for air, trying to control her sobs.

"Take a deep, slow breath, Karla." She did as he told her. At least he knew she could hear him. She hiccoughed and he felt his gut clench—and parts south tighten. "Again." He needed to keep his mind off how nice it felt having her curled up in his lap. If she didn't spill the story soon, he would embarrass himself—and probably scare the hell out of her.

"Tell me. Now, Karla." He didn't mean to sound so gruff, but it was all he could do to maintain control over his wayward dick.

As if a dam had burst, the words spilled out in a jumble, with sobs obliterating most of the details in the story. But he managed to get the gist of it.

Motorcycle. Rain. Semi.

Ian's dead.

Dead.

"Oh, God, no, Karla." Adam held her tighter, resting his chin on the top of her head, trying to envelop her in warmth and safety. "I'm so sorry." He ached for Karla and her parents. When tears burned his own eyes, he let them flow, knowing she couldn't see them. He cried for Ian, who hadn't been given a chance to live. He cried for Jenny and Carl, who had to be caught up in a living hell right now. He even cried for Joni, who he hadn't been able to cry for since that Thanksgiving morning in 2002 at Lake Michigan.

But mostly he cried for Karla. She didn't deserve this. Her world was supposed to be happy. Innocent. Full of hope. He wished he hadn't ignored his instincts. He knew something was wrong and should have gotten in touch with her sooner.

He didn't know how long she continued to sob, then her body suddenly went limp, sinking against him. Her weight felt good against him. She'd surrendered the last of her defenses. Thank God she'd come to him. Someone else might take advantage of her vulnerability.

While he and Karla had spent only a couple of days together face to face, they'd forged a deeper connection that spanned nearly a decade. She'd pulled him back from the brink when he'd thought there was nothing left for him in this world. Her letters over the years were honest, as if she were sitting right there at his feet telling him about her day.

No, don't think about her sitting gracefully at your feet.

Her letters had told of her life, her dreams, her world. He knew her better than he'd known any woman other than Joni.

Something or someone had brought them together again. He'd taken care of Karla once before. He'd take care of her this time, too. And he'd refuse to give in to the baser thoughts running rampant through his mind since he'd watched her performing on the club's stage a little while ago.

When her weight relaxed against him even more, he knew she'd fallen into a deep sleep. He held her a bit longer, stroking her arm, shushing her when her body convulsed with a shudder. Then he stood and carried her out the door into the hallway. They passed the theme rooms. Thank God she slept, although he knew she'd find them eventually, if she'd be working here.

Christ.

Damián came out of the medical theme room. He raised an eyebrow at seeing her curled up in his arms. *No, this isn't that kind of aftercare*.

The man he thought of as his son grinned and looked up at him, a question in his eyes. Adam wasn't ready to explain his relationship to Karla. He told himself it was because he didn't want to wake her by speaking. In truth, though, he didn't know how to explain her to Damián. He knew what their relationship had been before today. But how could he explain his feelings now without sounding like a fucked-up pervert?

"Go back upstairs and move her things to your old room." He kept that one made up, in case Damián ever needed it. His son's grin widened. He thought he knew the reason for moving her so close to Adam's own bedroom, when Adam had intended originally for her to be as far away from him as possible.

"I need to keep an eye on her."

“Sure. Let me know if I can help…Dad.”

Why had Damián chosen now, of all times, to remind him he was so fucking old? Hell, his surrogate son was only a couple years older than Karla. Maybe he should encourage them to get together. They both needed someone right now.

The thought of Karla being with Damián or any other man at the club rotted his gut, though. He carried her up the stairs. As he walked into the room where Damián had fought his demons all those years ago, he hoped Karla’s struggles would be much less. But in here, he’d be able to keep a close eye on her, just until she was ready to venture out and find a place to stay on her own.

*

Adam sat in the corner of her room and watched Karla sleep. He hadn’t wanted to scare her by removing her clothing, but had taken off her slippers and pulled a blanket over her. The thick black curls fanning out over the blue pillowcase sent his thoughts careening down dangerous paths yet again.

Demons flitted across her face a few times, but whenever he’d stand to go to her to fight them off, she’d become peaceful again and fall back into a deeper, more restful sleep. She couldn’t possibly be aware he was here, could she? He’d never admit he’d watched over her like this either. She’d think he was some kind of perv. But he was worried about her and she might not be as vocal as Damián had been when he’d battled his demons in that bed. Hopefully, she’d remain sleeping when he left her here alone.

Her black eyelashes flickered. Adam tensed. She moaned in her sleep and he was ready to go to her, to hold her until the nightmare ended. Then she sighed and returned once more to a deeper sleep.

Obviously, she hadn’t slept for a very, very long time. When had Ian been killed? Her last letter was two months ago and didn’t hint that anything was out of the ordinary. He probably should call Jenny and Carl and offer his condolences. Let them know Karla was with him. Safe.

Safe? Yeah, right. “Oh, don’t worry, Carl. Your daughter’s fine. She’s performing at my sex club—oh, musical performances only. Nothing to worry yourself about. She’s fine.”

Just fine.

Thoughts of her performing in other ways at the club flicked over his mind. Shit. No way would she be engaging in any activities other than singing as long as he had anything to say about it. He doubted she’d even be interested in BDSM. And, if she were, she’d probably lean more toward the Domme side, given the way she’d managed to order him in the head at the bus station.

He smiled. She seemed pretty taken with her ability to bring him to his knees, as he recalled. Well, Adam didn’t bottom for anyone. If he remembered

her in that role, perhaps he'd be able to put an end to his carnal thoughts about her.

Fuck. How could he be thinking horny thoughts about the Paxtons' daughter in the first place? God, Carl and Jenny had taken him in, patched him up, given him a place to rest. Hell, they'd even given him a plane ticket back to Pendleton.

He knew he'd have a battle on his hands to keep from thinking about having rough, kinky sex with their innocent daughter.

Fucking A.

Total clusterfucking-A.

Afterword

The End? Not by a long shot!
Watch for these upcoming titles in the Rescue Me series by Kallypso Masters:
***Nobody's Angel**—Master Marc's story, September 2011*
***Nobody's Hero**—Master Adam and Karla's story, December 2011*
***Nobody's Perfect**—Master Damián and Savannah (Savi)'s story, February 2012*

Kally would love to have you friend her on Facebook, follow her on Twitter, or check out her blog at http://kallypsomasters.blogspot.com.